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Mammoth DETECTIVE

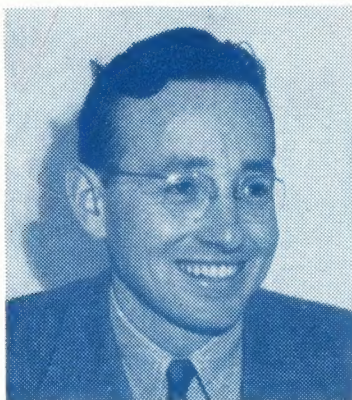
**THIS DEADLY
WEAPON**

By WADE MILLER





CONFESSES



Robert WADE



William MILLER

WE WERE so used to having our own names submerged under the collective title of "Wade Miller" that when our agent suggested that we adopt it as a nom de plume it came as no surprise.

The Wade Miller team (Bob Wade-Bill Miller) was born 14 years ago in a junior high school English class in San Diego, California. Our first collaborative effort was a one-act farce which we wrote, produced and starred in. Since then, the partnership has survived ten years of assorted schools, female entanglements and marriage. Even four years of war only bent the partnership but didn't break it.

At San Diego State College, we took four years of electives, mainly journalism and drama. We held all the jobs on school publications usually required for authors and were happily saved from settling down to work for our degrees by the outbreak of war.

Prior to this, however, we had worked as desk editors on a small Southern California newspaper and later as script writers for the Mutual-Don Lee network, writing such low budget shows as the School of the Air, the Don Lee Workshop and other time killers.

On the side, we won several unimportant contests for one-act plays and wrote two three-acters which were produced in San Diego by a little theater group at considerable expense to ourselves. Unintentionally, we became embroiled with Paramount Pictures for producing a 16 mm. burlesque of their "Beau Geste"—after discovering their desert set nestling on the sands near Yuma. After recovering our breath and a little of our money, we shot another feature length film burlesque, this time on a jungle theme. We carefully plagiarized several pictures instead of just one—which, of course, made the whole thing legal. Even more money was lost on this project.

The army air forces thoughtfully stepped in to avert our imminent bankruptcy. Wade went overseas for two and a half years as a public relations NCO, participated in the invasions of North Africa and southern France, and earned himself 106 points. Miller settled down to sergeant major the huge Santa Ana, California, army air base and didn't get overseas until V-J Day.

DEADLY WEAPON stems from an old three-act play outline which we fathered in 1940 and discarded. After considerable discussion, Miller drafted it as a 40,000 word mystery novel while in Manila. Wade rewrote, adding 20,000 words, and the book went to New York where it was bought by Farrar, Straus & Company for September publication. It is, by the way, the first mystery we ever tried—but it turned out to be the most enjoyable type of writing we've done. And certainly the most profitable.

Happily discharged, we're back with Mutual as script writers, working this time on a high budget show which stars Gloria Winke, radio actress and former child stage star. As Mrs. Wade, she has more than a casual interest in the Wade Miller combine.

On the statistical side, we're both 26. Our birthdays are less than a month apart. People keep telling us that we don't look like writers, which may not be much of an insult at that. Wade is stocky, brown-haired and brown-eyed, and is a native San Diegan. Miller, slender, brown-haired, blue-eyed, hails from Garrett, Indiana—a town which he claims is chiefly distinguished for his birth and the B & O roundhouse. Recent information indicates that the roundhouse has been torn down.

Our ambition is to keep writing. We can't quite shake the feeling that someone is going to discover what a racket this is. Racket or not, however, we hope to make it profitable to us.



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(Complete novel—60,000) by Wade Miller 8

Illustrated by Arnold Kohn

Just a little man, dead in a burlesque theater. But it led to several murders—and to love.

THERE'S ALWAYS TOMORROW
(Novelette—14,000) by William Lawrence Hamling . 68

Illustrated by Enoch Sharp

He fought wildly to save Ronnie's health and happiness. But his only weapon turned against him.

MURDER RIDES HIGH (Short—7,200)..... by Leonard Finley Hilts 92

Illustrated by Robert Fuqua

What can a man do if the answer to murder is high in the air and he must keep both feet on the ground?

EVERYTHING HAPPENS TO ME
(Novelette—13,000) by Frances M. Deegan 138

Illustrated by Rod Ruth

All they wanted was to get out of the rain . . . which gave a murderer the chance to pick a fall-guy.

YOU KNOW TOO MUCH! (Short—4,200).... by Richard Brister 164

Illustrated by William A. Gray

When you take a job digging a grave for a killer, don't be surprised if he pays off with bullets!

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SEPTEMBER 1946

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Front cover painting by R. Gibson Jones, illustrating a scene from "This Deadly Weapon."

**MAMMOTH
DETECTIVE**

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Volume 5
Number 6

OFF THE BLOTTER



AFTER a two-month lapse, a full-length novel is back in the pages of MAMMOTH DETECTIVE. This time we give you (for two-bits) a yarn we are especially proud to be associated with. A couple of young chaps out in California put the thing together . . . and discovered—with the proper amount of astonishment, we're sure—that they had really rung the bell. A book publisher snapped it up in a hurry and it will be between hard covers a month or two *after* you've read it in these pages.

THE title of the novel (of course you saw it on the cover, but we have to talk about something) is "This Deadly Weapon," and the author(s) is Wade Miller. Here is another story about a private eye, but with a novel treatment and twists that make it completely distinctive. You'll meet Kevin, who is like no other girl in detective fiction; and a homicide cop who is as real and believable as the business end of Police Positive; and a psychiatrist who is so terrific he can be nothing but a quack; a burlesque stripper whom nothing dismays . . . and Walter James, who is hard, tough—and very gentle. You're in for a couple of wonderful hours when you settle back in your chair to read "This Deadly Weapon."

ON THE inner side of the first cover are the pictures of the writing team responsible for this month's novel. There, too, are the details on how "This Deadly Weapon" came to be written, plus information that will give you a clear picture of the kind of personalities that put together a good novel.

TURNING now to the other stories in this issue: William Lawrence Hamling, who recently joined the staff of MAMMOTH DETECTIVE, presents a novelette that will really close a hand around your heart. It is called "There's Always Tomorrow," and its ending will leave a lump in your throat. Incidentally, there was once a cover painted for this story, but the exigencies of putting out a magazine during reconversion caused cover and story to become forever separated.

LEONARD FINLEY HILTS is the newest (and one of the brightest) star in our writing galaxy. At first glance you may mistake his story in this issue for some fugitive from an air adventure magazine. Put that idea away, for this is an

out-and-out mystery yarn, and a very good one too. Lennie is an ex-Navy flyer and he knows what he's talking about when it comes to planes and flying. Read "Murder Rides High" and judge for yourself.

TO THOSE of you who write in each month asking for more of Frances M. Deegan's stories: here's good news. Beginning on page 138 is one of her best; a yarn so good you won't want to start reading it until you're sure of having an uninterrupted hour. It's about a young married couple who get caught miles from civilization during a cloudburst. They pick out an old, ghostly looking house to spend the night. From then on everything happens to them . . . about the simplest of which is being accused of murder. For a thrill-packed hour, we recommend "Everything Happens to Me."

AN AUTHOR who is appearing more and more often in these pages is Richard Brister. You see his name in a lot of magazines these days, and that always means a man with a lot on the ball. As a case in point, read "You Know Too Much!" It's about a young man who was in the dog house for spending so much time reading "trash." It seems he took a walk one afternoon and ran into a peculiar setup. One thing led to another, all of them bad; and just about the time he was ready to leave this world permanently, he remembered something from one of the "trashy" stories he'd read. You take it from there!

LOOKING ahead: Next month comes another full-length novel . . . and once again you get a complete book novel ahead of book publication. This one is by Stewart Sterling, and it's another of the series about Fire Marshal Ben Pedley, who, in fiction form, fights flames in New York City. Not only is it filled with action and atmosphere, but you get an authentic insight on what goes on in fighting fires in a big city. Arson is one of the most feared of crimes; at best it means a terrible loss in property. The worst, of course, is that there is often a toll of innocent human lives. Reasons like these are why a Fire Marshal has many powers that even a city's police do not have. Summing it all up: There will be 60,000 words of flames, firearms and funerals!

—H. B.



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Until this day
the eyes of sailor
Samish take on a
mischievous
gleam at the
mention
of Suzy.

"TALES
FOR
MALES"
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MAN'S TASTE

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Bundling: An Old Yankee Custom

What Goes on in Ladies Rest Rooms —C. A. Hamilton
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The knife was already coming down when Walter James whirled about and swung a powerful blow to the man's chin

THIS DEADLY WEAPON

By WADE MILLER

**A tangled web of hate
and murder and women
without honor stood
between James and a
matter of vengeance**

WALTER JAMES eased himself into the aisle seat and tried to relax. He couldn't be calm at times like this; he felt his hands on his thighs, pulling the crease of his trousers a little higher. He felt his fingers at his stomach, buttoning and unbuttoning his double-breasted



coat. The fingers were a bit unsteady.

The music from the four-piece band behind the runway was self-consciously languorous, underwritten with heavy drum beats. Walter James could feel the rhythmic echo in his stomach: it will break any minute, it will break any minute. He brought his head around slowly, peering up into the darkened house to catch another glimpse of the man he had come to see. The house lights had been out for two minutes now, setting the mood for the Grand Theater's star attraction.

Yes, there he was—second seat from the aisle in the last row. A glow of embarrassed red from the weak footlights barely outlined the man's head against the back wall.

The tin voice over the public address system broke the spell of the drumbeat. "And now—what every man in San Diego has been dreaming of—the Grand Theater's own—lovely Shasta Lynn!"

Walter James turned his head back to face the stage. The curtain glided up. He automatically joined the clattering handclaps that greeted the woman standing in the footlight glow. The fat man next to him was whistling shrilly. As though the sound had cleared his head, Walter James sat up straighter, feeling almost relaxed. This was better. He turned his full attention on the woman.

Shasta Lynn was not overly pretty, he decided, but her nose was thin and straight and the planes of her face were

not irregular. But her body was lush: curved and flamboyantly sexual, it thrust arrestingly against the sheath of scarlet satin it wore. Her blonde hair was shoulder-length.

As the admiration of the audience subsided to a rustle, a microphone slid down from the top of the proscenium to shadow her face. She sang "All of Me" in a convincing voice, in tones that were softer than Walter James had expected. She stood very still as she sang, her hands moving occasionally and slightly against either thigh. She stood very still, knowing that every eye was on her diaphragm as she breathed out the words.

After the last soft "All—of—me" the band at her feet began to accent the drumbeats again. The microphone moved up into the gloom. The red draperies behind her crept silently apart. Now the woman was surrounded by funereal black, against which her blonde hair and white skin were incandescent. She began to undress, moving gracefully and rhythmically about the stage. The throb of the music quickened and blue footlights joined the red ones, caressing her weaving body with purple overtones.

Walter James leaned forward in his seat, wondering just what was strange about the dance. The suggestive movements of the stripper seemed calculated to arouse not lust but some bizarre and stealthier urge. Despite the feminine bloom of her body, they suggested an odd decadence that Walter James had never connected with womanly nudity before. What's wrong with her? he thought. He looked around at other members of the audience near him; their dim-lit faces seemed to be registering the normal reactions. I'm getting old, he thought; maybe thirty-eight is too old to appreciate this sort of thing. Then, while Shasta Lynn posed as na-

kedly as San Diego law would allow, taking the acclaim of the audience, he dismissed the whole idea.

The curtain dropped.

It rose again as the house lights went on. Male voices still shouted for Shasta as the entire cast paraded about the bright stage, stridently singing that the show was over but we're happy, happy, happy, and see you next week at the Grand The-ay-ter.

THE clatter of chairs and the subdued thunder of feet on the wooden floor as the audience prepared to leave drowned out the final chorus. There were a few scattered handclaps as Shasta Lynn and a lanky comedian bowed from center stage. The men—college youths, elderly salesmen, sailors, and an occasional untidy woman, began to seep up the aisle. As the curtain came down for the last time, the four-piece band swung into a march, overridden by the tin voice seductively announcing show times for Sunday. Walter James joined the mob in the aisle, pushing toward the man in the last row, the man he had come to San Diego to see.

As he thrust his slender frame through the massed bodies, a low scream leaped from the last row. The crowd stopped moving. Walter James pushed out of the aisle and scrambled over the three rows of seats that separated him from his goal.

A girl leaned against the back wall of the theater, awkwardly half in, half out of her seat, her clenched fists pressed against her shoulders. Her mouth was still open; her eyes held astonishment rather than terror as they looked down on the man next to her.

The man's head was bent forward as if he were straining to see his lap. But he was not looking at anything. A short knife-hilt protruded from his chest.

CHAPTER II

"YOU might as well all sit down," the big man said lazily. "We may be around here for a while yet." The audience, nervous from twenty minutes of waiting, subsided gradually into the theater seats. The murmur of their voices swelled a little as the big man took his gaze off them and looked at the corpse.

Walter James said to the girl who had screamed, "There's nothing to worry about at all. The police have the situation well in hand." He sat on the back of a seat, one hand soothingly on her shoulder. She looked up at him gratefully. Though a small man, a perfectly proportioned body gave Walter James the appearance of greater size. A slight quirk to his lips hinted a distant excitement behind the irregular lines of his face. His pale blue eyes glinted under mussed brown hair.

The big man flicked his eyes briefly at them. He stood towering above the medical examiner who fussed over the body.

"I'll want that knife when you pull it, Doc. And above all, don't screw up the prints again." He moved his tongue contemplatively over his front teeth.

"Got something to settle the young lady's nerves?" Walter James asked him. "She's on the shaky side." He removed his hand from the girl's shoulder and got out some cigarettes.

The big detective moved lightly up to him. "The doc'll take care of her as soon as he's through over there."

The girl shuddered. "I'm all right now," she said out of her white face. "May I have a cigarette, please?" She was a youngster, tweed-suitish dress, nice features, penny-colored hair.

"Sorry," said Walter James and dumped one out of his pack. The girl leaned forward and he lit it with the

glowing tip of his own. She huddled back in the seat again, keeping her eyes away from the men working over the body.

"It's not very pretty," the big man agreed sympathetically. "How old are you, miss?"

"Nineteen."

"Still going to school?"

"Uh-huh. I go to State."

The big man raised his eyebrows. "Name?"

"Laura Kevin Gilbert," the girl said reluctantly.

Walter James said quickly, "Wait a while, won't you? The kid's shaky. She was parked next to the body when the lights went up."

The big man shifted his gaze. "Who are you?"

"My name is James—Walter James." He puffed smoke at the big man's grey waistline.

"Stick around," the big man advised. He spun on his heel and started down the aisle toward the stage. "Jim, I want you."

An elderly plainclothesman detached himself from the cluster around the body and followed the big man down the aisle. The first few rows of the theater were filled almost solid with silent people; toward the rear where the body had been found only a few hardy souls remained. The big man unbuttoned his coat and leaned back against the runway. He removed his hat and ran his fingers through his thick, grayish-brown hair.

"Folks, I'm Lieutenant Clapp from your police department." He scanned them lightly, almost disinterestedly. "I don't want to detain any of you any longer than I have to so we'll try to get this over as fast as possible. A little Filipino has been killed back in the last row, probably while the show was on. It's probably murder. If any of you

know anything about it, I'd appreciate you telling us right now, in the interests of law and order."

He paused and glanced around expectantly. No one stirred.

"Don't hesitate to speak up if you noticed anything out of order in the last row, around the area where the body is." He paused again. Midway back in the theater, a hand was raised timidly. "Yes?"

A YOUNG sailor stood up. "My name's George Davis," he said uncertainly.

Clapp nodded encouragingly. "You saw something, did you?"

The youth twisted his head embarrassedly. "I—I think so—uh—Lieutenant."

"What was it?" Clapp asked him patiently. The sailor held a short whispered conference with the uniformed man next to him. He raised his head and spoke rapidly.

"Randy says he thinks so, too, so I guess I did see it. I was sitting across the aisle from the guy"—he indicated the body with a jerk of his blond head—"and I'm pretty sure that somebody was moving around there just about when the—uh—the lights went out."

Clapp ran a heavy hand over his tanned face. "What kind of moving?"

The sailor frowned. "I—I'm not sure, Lieutenant. I just saw it out of the corner of my eye."

"Thanks a lot, son." Clapp gave him a kindly smile. The sailor sat down and began to whisper animatedly to his companion. The big detective glanced around at the rest of the audience. "Anybody else got anything to add? No? All right—Crane here will take your names and addresses one at a time. If you know anything, tell him. If you don't, just give Crane your name, address, occupation and how we can

get in touch with you by phone—if we have to. Then you can go home to bed and you probably won't hear from us again. Thanks for your cooperation. All yours, Jim."

Clapp moved up toward the body again. "Where's that manager—Greissinger?" he called. A shiny-headed man poked between the curtains and came out on the stage.

"I'm just up here, talking to my people," he explained anxiously.

"You come down here and talk to me," rumbled Clapp.

"Sure, Chief. Anything I can do to help. We help you, maybe you help us keep some of the stink out of the papers." He hustled up the aisle after Clapp.

Clapp looked down at the body. Once it had been a male, lineage Filipino, age twenty-five to forty, about five feet tall, approximately a hundred pounds in weight, complexion dark, lots of long black hair greased back, hands a little withered and knotty on the backs, large solid gold ring on the left one, expensive wristwatch with a gold strap, purple silk sport shirt with plastic buttons, black wool trousers with a hard finish and a neat crease, black patent leather shoes about size six or smaller.

"Too bad," bubbled Greissinger. "An event like this gives an honest legit house a bad name. Anything we can do to clear this up and keep some of the stink out of—"

"In a minute," Clapp brushed him off. "What's the word, doc?" The medical examiner was a young man but he looked at Clapp with old eyes.

"Died instantly. Heart was punctured by the knife blade. It went in right below the sternum up to the hilt. He took about three inches. From the size of him, the blade probably went clear through his heart. The wound points to his right, about fifteen de-

grees. Anything else?"

"How long?" asked Clapp.

"Hell, he's fresh—within the hour. Very little bleeding, hardly got him dirty. He's just beginning coagulation now."

"Why no bleeding?"

"Look at the knife," said Stein. "It's a remake job, blade filed down to a quarter of an inch. It just made a puncture. Between the blade and the hilt, somebody's fitted on a round metal guard, about two inches in diameter. That served as a sort of cork. Very clean job. I'd like to have more like this."

"I'll see what I can do," said Clapp. "You can take him home with you now if you want. Thanks for the day."

"I'll give you a fuller report late tomorrow afternoon," Stein assured him. "I'm going to sleep in the morning. It's Sunday, you know."

"Not for him," said Clapp and turned to Greissinger. "You know the deceased here?"

"Yes—he works here. Or, anyway, he worked here. See, Chief, we want to help you all we can," insisted the manager.

"Lieutenant," said Clapp succinctly. "Sit down, Greissinger, you may save us trouble after all. So he worked here? What did he do!"

THE pudgy manager took a seat off the right aisle; Clapp filled the one in back of him, looming above him.

"He took tickets as our patrons came in. His name was Fernando Solez—been with us since we opened in '43."

"Kind of small to take tickets at a place like this, wasn't he?"

"The Grand Theater is a good, clean house. We don't have any trouble here—you know that, Lieutenant. Besides, we got Johnny—he's a pretty big fellow—he keeps the lines in order out in

the lobby and watches the box office in case Gladys has any rough customers. We've never had much trouble till tonight."

"Did Solez have any particular enemies?" asked Clapp.

Greissinger waved his hands. "No. Ferdy was a good clean boy—had nothing but friends. Everybody liked Ferdy—he'd do anything for you. Always a big smile." He showed Clapp how the dead man used to smile.

"If Solez was a ticket taker," mused Clapp, "why wasn't he out taking tickets? What in hell was he doing sitting in the audience?"

The manager moved his plump hands out horizontally. "Oh, that! Nothing suspicious about that, Lieutenant. Ferdy was nuts about the way Miss Lynn danced—Miss Lynn, she's my big attraction here. So we used to humor Ferdy—Johnny would take over the ticket box during Miss Lynn's number so Ferdy could come in and watch. No harm in that."

"Felix!" called Clapp. A stocky plainclothesman hurried in from the lobby; he was dapper despite his fat. "Start checking the cast and employees. The body worked here as a ticket taker, name Fernando Solez, been here since '43. I want to talk to the cast in a few minutes. Particularly to a babe named Miss Lynn. Don't scare them—just have them sit tight." Felix nodded and started toward the stage. "So," said Clapp, "Solez was nuts about Miss Lynn."

"No, Lieutenant!" protested Greissinger. He palmed the sweat off his bald head. "You got me all wrong! Ferdy just liked to watch Miss Lynn dance. She's a high type girl, very high-toned. Ferdy just admired her—he liked to run errands for her—you know, get cigarettes or something if she ran out."

"This Lynn woman got any jealous boy friends?"

"No."

"No, what?" pursued Clapp. "She got a husband, she living with anyone, who does she run around with?"

"She doesn't go out with anybody."

Clapp's lip curled. "Cut it, Greissinger. I'm old enough to know."

Greissinger took hold of Clapp's arm. "Believe me, Lieutenant, you got it all wrong. Miss Lynn is a high type girl. There is nothing wrong there. I have never seen her do anything out of the way." The pitch of his voice rose unevenly.

Clapp looked at him steadily. A spark kindled in the big man's eyes. He rose and the pudgy manager rose with him. "Okay, okay," the detective said, "but I think I'll have a little heart to heart talk with Miss Lynn, just the same."

Greissinger put his hands together as if preparatory to wringing them. "I can tell you anything you want to know, Lieutenant. There's no use wasting your time with my cast—" He felt the big man's eyes on him quizzically and he stopped abruptly. "She's backstage," he said uncertainly.

"Keep her there," advised Clapp. "I'll be back there right away."

The fat man let out his breath in a shuddering sigh and turned away. Clapp touched him lightly on the shoulder. "One other thing, Greissinger. Your man on the door—Johnny—tells me that not one of the audience left the theater before we got here." The manager nodded. "That puzzles me. Why did a good three hundred people stick around to chin with the police. Got an answer?"

"Well," said Greissinger, "that officer that's always around this block—Murdock—he was here five minutes after the girl screamed."

Clapp went after his point relentlessly.

"But did you send after Murdock? Who called the police station? Who held this crowd in here till Murdock got here and I got here? Did you?"

"Well, Lieutenant, I was going to do all those things—I wanted to cooperate as much as I could. But that man of yours was in the house, so he took charge and kept everybody from rushing out. He didn't have any trouble at all with the rougher element—after all, he had a gun."

Clapp asked slowly, "What man of mine?"

"Why, that gentleman up there," Greissinger pointed. Clapp's eyes followed the fat finger up to the back of the house and a new spark kindled in them. He crossed through the seats of the center section and marched up the left aisle toward Walter James.

CHAPTER III

THE girl had a little more color in her face now. Her low voice held an even keel as she talked to Walter James. Between sentences, she neatly touched up the areas of her wide mouth where she had chewed the lipstick away.

Clapp sat down ponderously by the pair. "Well, Mr. James," he said, "you seem to have distinguished yourself in our behalf tonight."

"It seemed the thing to do," the smaller man replied. "Do I get a merit badge?" He lit more cigarettes for the redhead and himself. Clapp pulled out a pipe and began preparing it for use.

"Naturally," he conceded, "I should be very grateful. However, being of a suspicious nature, I'm going to reserve our city's thanks for awhile. What's your angle, Mr. James?"

"No angle, Mr. Clapp," Walter James said, an amused glint in his blue eyes. "I acted within my rights as a

citizen."

"Police background?"

"Taught functional law three years at the Cincinnati police school."

Clapp waved at the remaining members of the audience by the runway, lined up to talk to the elderly detective. "You pull a gun on those other citizens?"

"No."

"You got a gun?"

"Of course."

"The brethren down there see it?"

"My coat was unbuttoned. Maybe some of them saw it."

"Suppose I see it." Clapp held out a big hand. From far under his left lapel, Walter James extracted a pistol and handed it to him. It was a .38 on a .32 frame. The shells showed shiny brass caps in every chamber.

"Got a license for this?"

"Not here—Atlanta."

"Oh." Clapp's heavy eyebrows pushed up. "A stranger in town. You like our little city?"

Walter James' eyes flicked toward the second seat, last row, center section. His lower lip twitched. "You put on this show every Saturday night?"

Around the edge of his tight collar, Clapp flushed. "How long you been here?"

"Thursday morning, nine o'clock. Serra Apartments, 3B, Jackson 0903. How about a receipt for that gun?"

With a quick smile, Clapp began writing it out. There was the sound of a scuffle in the foyer. Clapp was on his feet and three steps up the aisle when the hanging drapes were tossed aside and a black-shirted cop pushed a man wearing a plaid suit into the theater.

Clapp stood with his legs apart. "What's the trouble, Bryan?"

The black shirt jerked a visored head at the man in the plaid suit. "He's the

trouble, Lieutenant. He tried to sneak out the door while I was talking to the cashier."

Clapp frowned. "Name?" he snapped.

The man straightened his coat with an indignant jerk and looked at the big man sullenly. "John Brownlee," he said. "And tell your boy here to quit pushing people around, will you?"

"Sure," agreed Clapp. "But first you tell me why you were sneaking out of the theater just now."

"I tried to tell the cop," Brownlee said in a flat tone. "I wasn't sneaking out. I work here."

"What kind of work?"

"I—well, I kinda do a lot of things. I sell popcorn before the show and I change the marquee once a week and stuff like that."

"Go on."

Brownlee shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Well, I—well, I was just going to bring in the signboards from in front of the theater."

The patrolman broke in, "Don't believe him, Lieutenant. He was trying to sneak out without being noticed. I think there's something funny there."

BROWNLEE shot him a venomous glance. Clapp said gently, "We'll see, Bryan. Meantime, make sure that Crane gets him on the list, will you?" The patrolman grabbed Brownlee's arm, but the odd-jobs man shook it off viciously and walked down the aisle toward the thinning crowd at the runway with Bryan close behind him.

Walter James said, "You're a lucky man, Lieutenant. You nab your murderer fleeing from the scene of his crime."

Clapp grinned at him. "You'd be surprised, Mr. James, how particular the grand jury is about such things as motives and alibis."

The last of the audience tramped hurriedly up the aisle into the lobby. A moment later, the elderly detective came up and sat down by Clapp, slapping his notebook against his leg.

"Get anything, Jim?"

"Not much. You'd be surprised at the different occupations we had in this bunch tonight, though, Austin. Ones you wouldn't expect." He flipped the pages of his notebook. "Doctor, lawyer—"

"Merchant, chief," Laura Gilbert finished softly and subsided in embarrassment as the men turned their glances on her.

Jim looked at the girl speculatively. "The guy to her left was a grocery clerk, says she was here when he came in before the show started, didn't see her do anything strange, says she sat and looked straight ahead during the whole show. He thought she might be a good deal so he kept an eye on her. He says the Flip came in just before the last strip number. Doesn't remember anyone in the aisle seat. Seems like a nice enough kid."

Clapp's eyes and voice flowed kindly toward Laura Gilbert. "That check with what you know, Miss?"

"Mostly," she said soberly. "I think somebody was sitting to that Filipino's right for awhile. I seem to remember."

"When was this?"

"It was right after those two men were on the stage with that sausage." Her cheeks picked up a red reflection.

"That was the blackout before Shasta Lynn's strip," said Jim.

"Then the lights went out and that orchestra began a sort of bluish number." She pressed a slim knuckle against her teeth and tried to remember. "Somewhere along in there, I think, somebody sat down in the aisle seat. But when the curtain went up and it got a little lighter, I don't think

anybody was there."

"Did our Filipino friend make any move during that time?" asked Clapp.

"I didn't notice. I didn't notice anything until the show was over and I tried to go out and I asked him to let me by and he didn't move." She bit her lip.

"Well, that checks with what the sailor said," Clapp sighed. "Jim, see if they got the stuff in the body's pockets tagged and bring me a list."

"Okay, Austin." Jim went out into the lobby.

"Mr. James," asked Clapp, "where did you sit?"

Walter James nodded his head toward the other side of the theater, down front. "Right where that blackshirt of yours is cleaning his nails. Fourth row, aisle seat, inside of the right section. I came in just before Shasta Lynn's number."

"Why?"

"I'm a music lover. Ah'm from Atlanta and Ah just luhve the blues."

The girl giggled. Walter James winked at her. Clapp said, "You should work here. What is your work, by the way, Mr. James?"

"I've retired for awhile."

"From what?"

"Lantz-James Agency, Atlanta."

"What make of cars?"

WALTER JAMES extracted a paper from his trim black wallet and handed it to the big man. "That I want back," he remarked. Clapp read it through, running his tongue between his teeth and his heavy upper lip.

"Well, by God," he said, "I should have known." He returned the paper. "Now what are you really doing here?"

"Resting," said Walter James. "I have enough money for quite awhile so I'm resting. You can check it easily with Atlanta."

"You anticipate me, Mr. James," said Clapp drily. "But let me give you a tip, son. Don't think of opening an agency in this town. During the war we had more private cops here than city and county police combined. And most of them haven't gone home."

Interest widened Laura Gilbert's eyes. "Are you a private detective?"

"He was," corrected Clapp. "He's resting now." The girl exchanged smiles with Walter James.

"I thought you acted like you knew what you were doing tonight," she said warmly.

"I always know what I'm doing," said the slender man. His soft voice made it a compliment.

Jim hurried in from the lobby, his face wreathed in smiles. Clapp looked at him questioningly. The detective tossed a light weight green and white sport coat on the empty seat in front of the big man.

"Felix missed this in the lobby. It was hanging behind the door."

"The Filipino's?"

Jim nodded. The girl's eyes widened. She looked quickly at Walter James, who returned her gaze blandly, and then away.

"What do you have?" Clapp probed. "You're not grinning about a coat."

"No," agreed the older man. "But take a look at this." He handed a small flat tin box to Clapp. The big man opened it and sat staring at the brownish powder inside. He exchanged glances with Jim.

"I don't know why you're grinning," Clapp said. "This is likely to kick the hell out of a simple murder. Any prints?"

"None except his own. Same for his seat and the arm to his right. Everything on the right hand seat it pretty badly smudged."

Clapp sighed. "You might know."

"Nothing much in his pockets except a couple pictures of that blonde strip dancer. No great amount of money, some jewelry and a flashy knife. Looks unused except maybe for picking teeth."

"Anything else?"

JIM picked up the sport coat and ran his fingers into the pockets. "I didn't look in all of the pockets. I got excited when I found that box. Wait a minute, here's something." He pulled out his hand, a small square of white between his fingers. "What do you make of this, Austin?"

Clapp took the stiff paper gingerly by the edges. "Looks like half a business card to me." He held it up to the light and Walter James looked at it over his shoulder. The printed side read:

IFACE, M.D.
iatrist

Hours
9-4

Clapp turned the card over. On the back something had been scribbled in pencil. There were three lines of interrupted writing.

*I nee
oz im
regu*

Clapp frowned at it. The two men watched him silently. Laura Gilbert said in a small voice, "Does it help any?" The question broke the tension. Clapp put the torn card carefully into his coat pocket and grinned at the serious girl.

"It brings up a lot more questions," he admitted. He turned on Walter James suddenly. "Why did you kill him, Mr. James?" The redhead gave a

startled gasp.

"It's a long story," said Walter James. "He attacked my grandmother during the Mukden incident. Us James—we never forget a grudge."

"Like me," said Clapp. "I can remember every fly I've ever swatted." He grimaced thoughtfully. "Oh, well—we'll come back to that question later." He eyed the girl. "You didn't notice anything about whoever it was moved in and out of that aisle seat?"

"I'm not even sure there was anybody. I just think there was."

"You'll help us a lot if you keep thinking, Miss Gilbert." He turned to the elderly detective. "You might as well go home, Jim—it's getting late. You and Felix will have to come down tomorrow."

"Hell," said Jim and went away.

Laura Gilbert said, "I'm sorry I can't remember, Mr. Clapp. I just wasn't paying any attention. This is my first time in a place like this."

"Why does there have to be somebody in that aisle seat?" Walter James asked quietly.

Clapp said, "You know better than to ask that. The wound indicates that whoever did it would have to be sitting down. Theoretically, the young lady here could have done it with a backhand. If somebody sat to the Filipino's left, that person could have done it with a lunge stroke. The people in front couldn't have done it without being noticed."

"You keep ignoring suicide," said Walter James.

"Not the right circumstances and no prints on the hilt. As a professional," Clapp looked thoughtfully at the slender man, "you would appreciate the murder weapon. It's a store job, cheap, tailored down for a job like this. Thin blade to go in quick, short blade that would make sure of a medium size or

small person, a flat two-inch guard to avoid a mess. The hilt was originally a little longer than it is now—it's been cut off so it wouldn't show much, I guess. Yeah, I'd say the knife was ideal for killing a small man, quickly and neatly, in the dark. It could have been made for you, Mr. James."

WALTER JAMES dropped his cigarette. He groped for it with his foot, ground it out. When he looked at Clapp, he was smiling. "I've only been in town three days and I've had no trouble with my landlady."

Felix stuck his head through the part in the main drape. "Are you coming up here, Austin, or shall I send them home?"

Clapp waved at him. "Coming right away," he called.

"Okay, they're getting restless." Felix withdrew his sleek head. Clapp looked at Walter James and the girl. "You might as well come along. I want to talk to you a little more." Walter James helped the girl to her feet. Clapp led the way down the aisle, talking over his shoulder as he went.

"Answer me this, Mr. James—what was that card doing in the Filipino's pocket?"

"You mean half a card," said Walter James.

"Are they always this confusing?" Laura Gilbert asked. "Murders, I mean."

Walter James said, "No, most of them are pretty simple. Correct me if I'm wrong, Clapp, but the ones I've run up against are usually about as hard to see through as a piece of glass. Just find the motive. That's what the lieutenant here is trying to do right now."

Clapp mounted the wooden steps to the stage. "That's right."

The girl shook her copper-colored head as she followed him. "I don't see what possible motive there could be for killing a harmless little fellow like that."

Clapp parted the heavy curtain and the three of them eased through the opening onto the main stage. The clamor of voices stopped abruptly as if cut off by a knife. The principals and ensemble of the Grand Theater lounged casually around the stage, which was still set with the Dutch mill scenery of the finale. The cast had changed into street clothes. From the wings, Greissinger darted forward.

"Lieutenant, my boys and girls are worn out. Three shows tonight and a matinee tomorrow—"

Clapp waved him silent. "I don't like staying up late any more than you do, Greissinger." He looked around at the actors and rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "You people know what's happened here. I want to know why Fernando Solez was killed. Maybe you people can tell me. You knew him best."

A tall man in a trench coat got up from a seat on the mill steps. "Look, Lieutenant, I didn't even know the guy from Adam — how about me going home?"

Clapp looked at Felix inquiringly. Felix said, "That's Danny Host. The comic. He's been bellyaching ever since I got here."

Host thrust his thin face at Clapp. "How about it?"

Clapp said, "How come you didn't know Solez, Host? Or don't you pal around with the hired help?"

Greissinger interjected nervously, "I can explain, Lieutenant—" Clapp shut him off by turning his back on the pudgy manager. Host smiled with one corner of his mouth. "What he was going to say is that I'm new around

here. Just came in from Denver last week, Lieutenant."

"Why are you in such a hurry to get going?" Clapp asked. "Aside from sleep, I mean."

HOST glanced over his shoulder at the crowd of girls near the stage switchboard. He lowered his voice. "You know how it is, Lieutenant—I gotta meet a friend."

Clapp grunted. He turned away from the lanky comedian. "I'm sorry, Mr. Host. Your date'll have to keep." At the sound of his voice, one of the chorus girls bounced out of the crowd.

"Date?" she said shrilly. "What date?"

Host said, "Shut up, Dixie." She faced him, arms akimbo, eyes flashing. "Why, you dirty bum," she said. "So you *did* have a date tonight, huh? Giving me the brushoff, were you?"

Host kept himself under control with a visible effort. "Will you shut up, you little tramp?" he said, barely moving his lips.

The epithet set Dixie off. "Tramp, huh?" she screeched. "All right, you—" She clawed at Clapp's arm. "He says he didn't know Ferdy, didn't he, Lieutenant? Okay, ask him who he was arguing with this evening before the show."

A slow grin lit the big man's face. He looked at Host with fresh interest. "Well, Host—maybe you'd better go over that story of yours again."

Host gave Dixie a flashing look. "All right," he said. "I forgot about it."

"Huh!" sniffed the girl. Her blondined hair bounced slightly as she tossed her head.

"Well?" prompted Clapp.

Host looked at the floor. "I did have an argument with Solez tonight, but I still didn't know him very well. He

was snooping around the dressing rooms before the show and I'm kinda nervous anyway around that time. There wasn't anything to it."

Clapp nodded his head slowly. "Any witnesses?"

Host gave Dixie another venomous look. "I don't know. I didn't think so at the time."

"You have an alibi for the time of the murder?"

"When was that?"

"Somewhere around the last strip number."

Host said, with only a momentary hesitation, "Sure—sure, I gotta alibi. I was backstage waiting for the finale."

A cool voice said from across the stage, "While you're having a heart to heart talk, why don't you tell the lieutenant everything?"

As one, they turned and looked at Shasta Lynn.

CHAPTER IV

THE blonde dancer didn't move from her position at the rear of the stage near the curtains. She stood there easily, gracefully, with one hand held lightly against her hip. With the other she held a lighted cigarette. She was fully dressed in a clinging black dress, street length, with gold accessories that matched her hair. A small black hat with a short veil completed the costume.

"Isn't she ever natural?" Laura Gilbert whispered in Walter James' ear.

Shasta Lynn moved forward toward them, walking with a sleek grace. Walter James again felt the wrongness about her. He squeezed Laura Gilbert's arm gently. "Does she seem odd to you?" The girl looked puzzled.

Clapp said, "You're Miss Lynn?"

She didn't smile at him. Her actions seemed to have no trace of coquettish-

ness. "That's right."

"Maybe you'd better explain that remark of yours."

Dixie took Clapp by the arm, tugging at the sleeve. "She doesn't know what she's talking about, Lieutenant—"

"Let me be the judge," Clapp said and removed Dixie's hand from his arm.

Danny Host made an impatient gesture with his arms and let out his breath explosively. "Hell's bells!" he said. "I'll come clean, Lieutenant."

"Come all the way this time," suggested the big man.

"There isn't much to tell. I was backstage like I said, except that I stepped out into the alley to have a cigarette."

"When was this?" asked Clapp sharply.

"Oh, a few minutes before her strip."

"How long were you there?"

The comedian frowned. "I don't know. I didn't look at my watch. Maybe ten, fifteen minutes."

Clapp said gently. "That's along cigarette." Host shrugged and looked away. Clapp considered him thoughtfully.

Dixie said suddenly, spitefully, "You might ask Miss High and Mighty just why she's been so chummy with Ferdy."

Shasta Lynn turned her head slowly and looked at the chubby dancer. Dixie involuntarily moved back a pace.

Clapp said, "I was getting around to that. Solez thought pretty highly of you, Miss Lynn."

"Yes," said Shasta Lynn evenly. "We were good friends."

"Uh-huh, that's very nice," the big man continued. "But just why, Miss Lynn? You've got the reputation of being pretty standoffish. You don't mix very well. The girl here called you

Miss High and Mighty just a minute ago. It doesn't seem right that you should be friendly with a little Filipino doorman."

Shasta Lynn's eyes behind the veil were impenetrable. "There isn't a law about where you choose your friends, is there, Lieutenant?"

"No, I can't say there is. But—was he only a friend, Miss Lynn?"

SILENCE vibrated across the stage.

Walter James watched the dancer's hand at her side curl into a claw. Her mouth twisted. She spat at the big detective, "Keep your dirty mind to yourself!" Her hand was coming up like a striking tiger paw when a small girl in a nondescript brown and white polkadot dress materialized beside them. She put her pale face and enormous eyes between the two.

"You leave her alone!" Her voice was highpitched, off-key. Clapp, unmoved by the tableau, cocked an inquiring eyebrow at Felix. The plump detective shrugged his shoulders. "She's not even one of the cast. Just another of Shasta's friends."

Clapp turned back to the small girl. Her hair was mouse-colored and unattractively arranged. "What's your name, miss?"

Greissinger said nervously, "She's Madeline Harms."

"Let her tell it."

Shasta Lynn said, "I'm all right, Madeline." She seemed to have recovered her poise. She stroked the smaller girl's arm soothingly. Madeline looked at her uncertainly. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant. But I don't like to have people say things like that. Madeline's a friend of mine. She gets upset easily."

"He doesn't have any right talking to you like that, Shasta," said Madeline. Her eyes remained fixed on the dancer's face.

"If I'm wrong, I apologize," said Clapp. "But I'm investigating a murder and it's starting out like one hell of a job. I haven't the time to go easy on people's feelings. Do you have an alibi for the time just before your number, Miss Lynn?"

Greissinger's voice was highpitched. "What's all this talk about alibis for my people, Lieutenant? Ferdie was killed in the audience, not on the stage."

Clapp raised his voice. "You might as well all hear this. Solez was killed while the show was going on." He indicated the girl by Walter James' side. "Miss Gilbert here has the idea that someone came in and sat down by the dead man toward the end of the show and then got up and left. It was probably the murderer."

"How does that tie us in?" Danny Host asked him.

Clapp looked around slowly. "The murderer knew Solez' habits pretty well. That's obvious. That doesn't necessarily mean somebody who works here, but it might. And there are passages on both sides of the stage that lead into the house. It wouldn't have been too hard to duck out after a number, plant a knife in Solez and come back in time for the next spot."

An excited murmur broke out at this. Clapp turned again to Shasta Lynn. "So what's your alibi, Miss Lynn?"

"I have to powder my body before my number." The dancer gave him an icy smile. "It takes about ten minutes."

"Any witnesses?"

"Madeline always helps me." Madeline nodded her head vigorously. She clung to Shasta Lynn's arm with both hands.

"Very neat," said Clapp. "You clear each other that way." He shrugged. "Well, we'll see. Felix, did you get the names and addresses?" The dapper

detective nodded. "Then let's go home." He turned toward the empty house.

GREISSINGER padded after him. "Lieutenant," he wheezed anxiously, "the newspapers—if they get this, it's gonna be tough on me—"

Clapp rubbed the back of his neck and squinted his gray eyes wearily. "Okay," he said, "it won't be the Grand Theater. It won't even be a burlesque joint—just a downtown musical showhouse. That'll go on just as long as you play ball with me."

The oily manager smiled his gratitude. "Thanks a million, Lieutenant. I won't forget it. I'll give you all the help I can. You can count on me."

"All right, all right," said Clapp heavily and went down the wooden steps into the theater. Walter James guided Laura Gilbert after him.

"Okay," Felix said in back of them as they started down the steps. "That's all for tonight. Don't anybody leave town until you hear from us." The voices rose again in chorus. The iron stage door banged open.

"Tired?" Walter James asked the girl.

She gave him a weary smile. "Can I sit down for a minute?" She sank into a seat in the front row. She sighed. "Those terrible people!"

Walter James shrugged. "You can't expect the four hundred in a place like this." He glanced at the empty theater. The blue curtain rose tiredly. The last of the cast were filing out the stage door. An old fellow in blue denim overalls came out on the edge of the stage and sat down. He swung his legs a little as he began pulling limp sandwiches from a paper bag.

Clapp came back down the aisle to them. "I'd like to see you both in the morning. Say about eleven. What's your address, Miss Gilbert?"

"Address?" She rattled it off. "It's at the corner of El Cajon and 45th Street, right behind Gilbert Realty."

"That your father?"

"Yes—he's J. A. Gilbert."

"Mother?"

"No, Mom's been dead for quite awhile."

"And you go to State?"

She nodded. Clapp looked at her steadily. "I know that some of the sorority girls like to do some slumming here, but they don't usually come alone."

The girl put a little v between her eyebrows. "It's kind of hard to explain . . . to you. I was just downtown and—and—I wanted something to do. Something a little different. Life seems so slow sometimes." She smiled at him. "I guess it sounds pretty silly."

"No," said Clapp. "Just let me tell you what I had to tell my youngster a while back. She's a little older than you and she's up at U. C. L. A. You can't force excitement into life. You generally find out what excitement has been after it's all over. You were lucky tonight—if sitting next to a dead Filipino was what you were looking for. But this Grand Theater business isn't life. It's all fake. You'd do better to sit back and wait for life to come to you. It'll come along and it'll probably be pretty good. Not that I really expect you or my girl to believe me and do just that. Have you got a way home?"

"Thank you," she said softly. "My father wouldn't have put it that way. And thanks for the ride but Mr. James is going to run me out. He lives in my direction."

CLAPP quirked the corners of his mouth at the slender man and stood up, patting the sides of his gray-

suitied stomach wearily. "I'll see you two tomorrow. God, I'm gonna hate to get up."

Laura Gilbert smoothed the wrinkles from her skirt and joined Walter James in the aisle. Little half moons were beginning to show beneath her eyes. "I feel a hundred years old," she murmured.

"Would it help any to say that you don't look it?" Walter James asked her. She smiled at him. He took her arm as they went up the aisle and into the lobby.

A black sedan and a black and white prowler car were double parked on Market Street. Clapp moved toward the sedan where Felix was a dark shadow at the wheel.

Walter James took a firmer grip on the girl's tweed elbow. "My car's up this way."

Across Market Street, from between two looming store fronts came a low "poom" and a brief blur of flame. Behind Walter James and the girl, the glass covering a full-length display of Shasta Lynn's charms tinkled merrily to the sidewalk.

Walter James yanked the redhead to shelter behind a parked Chevrolet with one hand and clawed under his left lapel with the other. "Get down!" he yelled.

Clapp was shouting, "Get that block covered in a hurry!" Felix rocketed the sedan straight ahead for Fifth Street. The prowler car spun to the opposite curb. Gun first, a black-shirted cop leaped for the plate glass store front and edged along it toward the darkness between the two buildings. Reaching the dark slot, he waved his hand at the prowler car and plunged in. The driver of the black and white car watched the opening for an anxious second, then roared his vehicle around the Sixth Street corner.

Clapp appeared suddenly beside Walter James and the girl. "Hit you?"

Walter James took his handkerchief away from the girl's head. The blood on it was brighter than her hair.

"Tipped her ear."

"I'm all right," Laura Gilbert said shakily. "I'm all right. It doesn't even hurt."

Clapp stated heavily, "One of you has plenty to tell me. And we'd better go down to headquarters and talk it over."

He looked up at the full-length picture of the undraped Shasta Lynn. Where her navel had been was a small round hole.

"Got her dead center," he said.

CHAPTER V

CLAPP took three cans of beer out of a small icebox. "It's okay," he said. "It's too darn late to consider this on duty time. Besides, we all need it."

"I can't think of anything I'd like more right now," said the girl. She sat by Walter James in front of Clapp's desk with her mirror propped against her purse; she was diligently combing her coppery red hair over her left ear to hide the bright white bandage.

Clapp broke into the beer cans with a little grunting. "You like beer?" he asked. "So does my Sheila—but she always says she has to watch her figure." He lowered himself into a creaky swivel chair and lifted his beer can in a toast. "What'll it be?"

Walter James' hand shook a little. "Confusion to our enemies," he said soberly. Clapp glanced quickly at him; the spare little office was silent for a briefness as the three people drank deeply. The room came to life again with Clapp's satisfied "Ah!" Laura Gilbert peered into her mirror, inspect-

ing her mouth. She turned her head from side to side, trying to decide about her hair.

"I've always had trouble with my ears," she explained when she felt the four male eyes on her, "trying to make them look smaller than they really are. The bandage is the last straw. It's like a flag."

Walter James leaned back in his chair and laughed a wholehearted laugh. Laura Gilbert began to smile slowly and a moment later her tinkling laugh played an obligato for the private detective's harsher tones.

"Thanks," she said softly. Her eyes met Walter James'.

"My pleasure," he said. "I was strung as tight as a violin string."

Clapp said thoughtfully. "I never knew a girl yet who didn't think that her ears were too big. My daughter's the same way."

The girl smiled, unconvinced. "But mine really are, Lieutenant."

"Maybe it's because anybody's ears seem big if you look at them long enough," said Walter James and brought out his cigarettes.

Clapp dug up his pipe, regarded it painfully and tucked it away in his desk drawer. "Been smoking too much lately," he explained and leaned back. "Well, I never thought at eight o'clock Saturday morning that I'd still be here at two o'clock Sunday morning."

Laura Gilbert laughed. "I never thought I'd be here at all."

Clapp grinned engagingly across his desk. "And you, James—did you ever expect to be here?"

"I had considered the possibilities," he admitted. "Right now I'm expecting us both to be arrested for keeping Miss Gilbert out so late."

"You can forget that," she said quickly. "I come and go as I please."

"Nobody does that," said Clapp, "and I've got a houseful of city guests back here as extreme examples. Nobody's ever succeeded in being a completely free agent."

"Keep an eye on me," said Walter James.

"I will," smiled Clapp agreeably.

The hall door, lettered AUSTIN CLAPP HOMICIDE, jolted open and Felix came into the office. He was still panting slightly.

"God, how I hate these cases with exercise," he breathed.

"Have a beer and give us the word," suggested Clapp. "We're just getting settled for the night."

Felix laid a pistol on the desk top and began rummaging in the icebox. "Here we are," he announced. "Who's got the opener?" Clapp produced it from the desk drawer. Felix jammed it into the can and took a long draught. "That's better."

L AURA GILBERT leaned forward and pressed the edge of the desk with both hands. "Well, tell us," she insisted. "Did you catch anyone?"

"She's taken over," Clapp enlightened Felix with a grin.

"Oh," said Felix. He sat on the edge of the desk. "Well, here's my report. Nobody. Nobody seen or heard lurking around the neighborhood. Couple of footprints in the alleyway but they were scuffed up—might not have been fresh, anyway. There's the gun—fancy job, .25 caliber, one shell fired. The slug we dug out of that picture's—ah—tummy matches the rifling. No prints. Marks on the outside of the barrel indicate a silencer. We didn't find any silencer. The gun hasn't been cared for. Pretty grimy." He stopped talking suddenly. "You people as tired as I am?"

Clapp picked up the gun, smelled it,

inspected it closely. "Give it to the lab tomorrow. Maybe Larry can make something out of the junk in the bolt-heads." He centered the pistol carefully on his blotter and watched the light reflections from its silvered surface as he talked.

"There are two possibilities, offhand. One is that whoever occupied that seat to the right of the Filipino boy began worrying about Miss Gilbert remembering something about him and hung around to take a potshot at her."

The girl's eyes widened. "Have you remembered that something yet, Miss Gilbert?"

"No—no, I'm not even sure there was anyone ever in that seat."

"There had to be," said Walter James. "You didn't knife the man."

"Why not?" said Clapp suddenly.

Two ivory cords stood out on the girl's throat. "No," she protested faintly. "I'll try to remember. But I don't think there's anything to remember."

Clapp stood up, a tower in the small office. "She had the opportunity, James. She has the strength. And she has the guts—look at the way she's held up tonight."

Walter James leaned on the desk with his elbows, his hands folded under his chin. The light blue eyes that looked up at Clapp were flat and icy.

"Quit acting like a dumb cop, Clapp. We're both too old for that. You don't have a case against this girl and you know it. You're not after the girl and you know it. You're after me."

"I know more than that," said the big man heavily. "I know you won't leave this building until you tell a long, long story."

"You can throw me in on a gun count. I'll be out tomorrow on bail and Monday I'll pay off the fine. About Tuesday you'll get word from Atlanta.

You'll pull me in again because I killed three men there but you won't be able to hold me. About next Saturday you'll get a registry report on that .25 on your desk and you'll pull me in again because that's my gun. You won't be able to charge me but you'll put up a hell of a fight to hold me as a material witness. And you'll lose. If you want to play that way, Clapp, I promise you, you'll lose. I know this game as well as you do."

CLAPP'S eyes were steady and leaden in his hard face. "How do you want to play, James?"

Walter James leaned back and said softly, "I want to see us both cooperate. I want to tell my long, long story and walk out of here. I don't want to see anything behind me but my own shadow. I don't want to be booked on any 1898 charges because I'm a stranger in town."

Clapp sat down. "What are you bidding with?"

"Two bodies right now. One in Atlanta and the one tonight." Walter James smiled coldly. "I may raise you later."

Clapp cleared his throat. "Give us the story and you can leave tonight. If the story checks and if you can keep your nose clean, I think we'll get along."

"I could stand another beer," said Felix.

"We all could," agreed Clapp, "but close the icebox door this time."

"I decided to team up with Hal Lantz in 1942," said Walter James. He ran his hand through his wavy brown hair. "I hadn't known him except casually around town before then. We had offices about four blocks apart, on opposite sides of the city hall, but we'd meet occasionally in a bar or at police court. A private investigator has to keep an eye on the other half—how

they're living and who they are. Thanks, Felix."

He sipped at the beer reflectively. "I inquired around and found that Hal was a pretty shrewd operator. I put it up to him—if we went in as partners, we could do about ten times as much business as we were doing separately. That's just the way it worked out. We put up a big, reputable-looking front and began drawing the people that wanted dirty little jobs done but were afraid of the dirty little agencies. We pushed a few of the shoestring boys out of business and hired the best ops away from the others, so pretty soon we had Atlanta just the way we wanted it. And there was enough money to go around. On summer nights, a lot of husbands need following.

"Furthermore, we made a big point of getting along with the local cops. We never crossed them up and our outfit kept a lot of trouble from ever getting out of the idea stage. Then, too, between Hal and me, we had a lot of stuff in our files that helped them out now and then. We even used our men in a few spots where they wouldn't have dared used their own — politically speaking."

Felix nodded appreciatively.

"I'm making a point of all this," said Walter James, "so you'll realize what an unblemished child I am."

"You mentioned three men," Clapp said mildly.

"You can't keep out of trouble forever. All three were self-defense and there was never any fuss over it. I shot two and ran down another with Hal's Buick."

"So you've been buying Buicks ever since. That makes a nice testimonial," said Clapp. "Any witnesses to all this?"

"No," admitted the slender man. "They weren't needed. You should have learned by this time that most

killings are private affairs." He flashed the girl a quick smile. She was sitting erect in her chair, her eyes fixed intently on his face.

"I've never had to kill a man," said Clapp.

"Maybe you're a poor shot."

"I had the public welfare course ten years ago in police school," Felix broke in. "Let's get on with the story."

ANYHOW, we did pretty well— Hal and I. I was from Cincinnati but Hal was a native son—he'd been a star halfback somewhere down there in his younger days and that didn't hurt business any. And he was as friendly with our clients as if he was selling cars. Made a hell of a good front man. But he was smart for all his size."

Clapp grunted.

"So that was the way we ran our business. Hal got out and met our clients and I ran the office and kept up the contacts with people who weren't our clients but who we needed just as badly. I didn't get around too much unless things got involved and needed the plug pulled. Hal was smart but there are times in the agency racket when you need brains *and* speed. Or maybe just speed."

"Okay. So you and your Hal got along like two worms in a big red apple. So what?"

"Let W. Somerset James tell his story in his way," reproved the slender man. He sipped his beer deliberately. "Yes, we got along fine. We didn't share a doughnut every morning, but we got along fine. Whenever we had time for any social life, the three of us generally went out together."

Clapp raised his heavy eyebrows.

"Hal had a wife, Ethel. They were crazy about each other. She was a tall, good-looking blonde and Hal was

damn proud of her."

"Jealous?"

"Not of me, if that's what you're getting at."

"You married?"

"I'm a free agent." He gave Laura Gilbert an oblique glance. Her red mouth curved faintly at the corners.

"In fact," Walter James continued, "Hal was so obviously wild about Ethel that one man we were dealing with thought he could get at Hal through her. It was later on in that case that the Buick came in handy."

"This place gets a little cold this time of morning," Clapp said to the girl. "I can get you a blanket out of Stein's office."

"I'm all right," she said, pulling the tweed coat a little tighter. "I just had a chill for a second." She stroked the hair over her left ear. "Please go on. I feel fine."

"That was the setup," said Walter James, "and we never got involved because we kept our noses clean. But the way the agency operated, sometimes Hal didn't know what I was doing and I didn't know what he was doing. And about two months ago—July—Hal stumbled onto something he couldn't handle. Only he thought he could. He didn't tell me much about it, said he didn't know anything definite. But the Atlanta cops had been having trouble for some time with pretty good sized loads of dope being distributed across the South—and apparently out of Atlanta. They had called us and said if we got any leads along that line to cut them in. Well, whatever Hal picked up was along that line. He told me that much. But I figured that if he picked up something important he'd let me know and we'd work the deal along with the cops."

"Dope?" Clapp asked.

"Marijuana."

"From here?"

"That's right."

"How do you know?"

"The first of August Hal flew to Denver on a case. He was gone a lot longer than he should have been. I didn't think anything of it at the time because he was his own boss. When I got into San Diego Thursday I drove straight to the airport. They showed a Hal Lantz coming in from Denver through L. A., staying here two days and flying back the same way."

"It'll take more than that to involve this town."

"Okay. Three days after Hal got back from Denver some Boy Scouts found him parked in his car on the outskirts of Atlanta. Somebody had emptied a .45 into him. He'd been dead all night."

"You own a .45?" Clapp asked gently. The little office died.

WALTER JAMES breathed out and his eyes went icy again. "That's a poor question," he said.

"Yes, it is," Clapp agreed suddenly. "And I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked it at this point."

"I'll answer it at this point. No." Walter James put his hand next to Laura Gilbert's on the desk. It was just as white and almost as small. "I have trouble holding onto a .45," he said.

"Have one of my cigarettes," the girl suggested. She lit it for him with a tiny lighter.

"Furthermore," said Walter James after a moment, "except that the light was seen burning in my office at the agency, I have no alibi for the night my partner was gunned out."

"What did the police find?"

"Nothing. Not even the gun. Hal's wallet was emptied and he generally carried any papers he was working on

in his inside coat pocket—that pocket was empty, too. And he didn't leave me a letter or a damn thing telling me what progress he had made on whatever it was. Maybe he hadn't made any progress. Maybe somebody just thought he had."

"I guess his wife took it pretty hard," Laura Gilbert ventured softly.

"We never found out," said Walter James. "She was in Miami at the time and she never came back. Checked out of her hotel, with a few personal items, and disappeared. Left most of her clothes."

"Anything more on that?"

"No. Atlanta has been checking every unidentified body on the East coast but no tall blondes. No nothing."

"What makes you so sure that this town is involved?" Clapp passed his hand wearily over his tanned face.

"I wasn't—up until the show tonight. Three days after Hal was killed, I got a tipoff by phone. It was a man's voice. It said that if I told the Filipino at the Grand Theater in San Diego that I was Dr. Boone, I might get some place."

"Dr. Boone? Who's he?"

"Nobody in the Atlanta directory or the San Diego directory," said Walter James. "Nobody at all—yet. I scouted the Grand Theater Friday and again Saturday afternoon. The Filipino always sat in on that strip number toward the last. I figured I wouldn't have to sit through that damn show again—that I'd be safe in coming late and I could nab him after the show. Well, that's the story. I never got the chance to pass myself off as Dr. Boone." He drummed on the empty beer can with his fingernails. "Oh. There's one other item. That gun—the .25—that's one of a set I gave Hal on his last birthday. They're out of my collection and I think I can give you the

number tomorrow on the other one. Except that it's a lady's pistol—concealed hammer and a little smaller—it's the same design."

"Did your partner have a silencer?"

"He may have. I don't know."

"Did he have the guns on him the night he was killed?"

"I don't know."

"Were there any witnesses to that telephone tipoff you got?"

"No. How many witnesses do you have to your phone calls?"

"Not a hell of a lot." Clapp rubbed his tongue over his teeth and squinted his eyes wearily. Walter James pushed his two beer cans into the wastebasket.

"May I go home now?"

"Okay," said Clapp. "You can go home." Walter James stood up first, then Laura Gilbert rose a little uncertainly, with a glance at the big man. He nodded. "Sure, you, too." Walter James pushed open the door for her. Clapp wagged a finger at him.

"Here's something else to think about, James. That box—the one we found in the Filipino's sport coat—"

"Yes," said Walter James agreeably.

"I recognized it. Marijuana, wasn't it?"

Clapp sighed. "Yes," he said. "Marijuana."

CHAPTER VI

A WHITE stucco carton stood on the corner of El Cajon Boulevard and 45th Street. Above it a half-story rudder of tin proclaimed in blue and white: J. A. GILBERT REALTOR.

"That's it," announced the girl. Walter James wheeled the Buick in a U turn and pulled it up in front of the office. A flagged walk ran past the corner building to the back of the lot where another white stucco building huddled ineffectively behind two skeletal palms. "My home," said Laura

Gilbert flatly.

Walter James snapped off the lights. "What's that big job across the street?"

"Hoover High. I used to go there. The college is about five miles on out." She wiggled her fingers east toward the Laguna mountains and El Centro and Yuma.

"Studying to be anything?"

"No. What is there to be?"

"You're bitter — even for three A. M."

"I mean it," the girl said, looking straight ahead. "I want to be something but I don't know what. Liberal Arts isn't any great adventure, but there isn't anything I'd rather take. Oh, I don't know what I want."

"It's not uncommon," agreed the slender detective. "How about getting married?"

"Most of the girls are looking high and low for husbands. I've never seen a husband I wanted." She blew smoke viciously at the windshield. "I'd hate to cook steak and potatoes seven nights a week."

"Who is so fond of steak and potatoes?"

"Bob," she said, and stopped short to regard him curiously. "You know your business, don't you?"

Walter James laughed. "Really, I didn't mean it as business. I'm interested."

"Why?" Two freight vans roared by in quick succession, filling the silent boulevard with savage sound. After it had melted away, she said, "Never mind. As you say, that's a poor question. Bob Newcomb is editor of *The Aztec*—that's the college paper—and I work on *The Aztec* quite a bit. He's a very sweet boy with what is known as a fine mind. He has an odd taste for taking me to dances. Why, I don't know because frankly I don't dance very well. But I guess he really is pretty

smart."

After a pause, she added, "Brains aren't everything. Sometimes you like brains *and* speed. Or just speed. You said that, didn't you?"

A light came on in the house, an orange rectangle that silhouetted one slim palm tree. "It is pretty late," said the girl. "You better take me in."

"I want you to remember something about the man who sat on the other side of the Filipino."

"But I can't. Am I in trouble if I can't?"

"No—you're not in trouble. But so far there aren't so many leads in this case that I can afford to pass any up. Keep trying—please."

"I bet you don't say please very often."

Walter James laughed again. "You know your business, don't you?"

"I hope I didn't sound rude. I just happened to think of it." She smiled demurely. "I got a busy little mind, too." Her face sobered. She half-turned on the seat to face him. "I shouldn't be laughing. That poor little guy——"

Walter James said, "Death's never pleasant to see."

"But to go that way—in the dark and—and——"

"Don't think about it," Walter James told her gently. "There's nothing you can do. Brooding's not going to help."

SHE looked up at him and tried a pale smile. "I'm sorry, Mr. James. But I wish that I could do something to help. What do you think about tonight?"

Walter James smiled. "That's a big question. Clapp seems to be handling the routine work as well as anyone can."

"You sound as if you're holding something back."

"Well," Walter James said, his blue

eyes thoughtful. "The thing that interests me most in this mess so far is that card they found in the Filipino's coat."

"Oh," she breathed her disappointment. He raised an eyebrow quizzically.

"And you, Sherlock, what do you make of it all?"

Laura Gilbert made a negative gesture with one hand. "I don't know anything. I'm not smart at this sort of thing. But I thought from what you said about Shasta Lynn——"

"You don't like her, do you?" Walter James interjected softly. "Why?"

Silence crept in. "I don't even know her," the girl said stiffly. "Why should I dislike her?"

"Answering a question with a question isn't polite," smiled the slender man. "But let it pass." He put his finger on the door handle and paused. "May I pick you up for dinner tomorrow night? Six o'clock?" He got out and walked around to the curbside door. Laura Gilbert was looking at him with a little frown on her forehead.

"You must be way ahead of me. I don't think I understand," she said.

"There's no problem to it. I'm not being devious. I just think we'll get along."

"Oh, I'm sure we would," she said and put her head to one side. "I don't know just how to put this and I don't want to make you feel funny, but—aren't I a little adolescent for you?"

"I'm thirty-eight," said Walter James, "and even my adept mind can't see quite what that has to do with it." He opened the door; she collected her belongings and slipped gracefully to the ground.

"I'll tell you what. I'll let you know later." There was the hint of a saucy smile on her red lips. "Let me pretend to think it over, anyway, and I'll

let you know at the police station tomorrow—today."

"I'll see you at six then," he said. "It's not necessary for you to come down to headquarters. Get some sleep."

"But Mr. Clapp said——" she whispered.

"You need the sleep and I think I can keep Clapp occupied. I have the upper hand temporarily."

She grinned outright. "You're power mad."

"Not at the moment. Not with your father to face."

They walked up the flags together, two streetlighted figures of the same height. As they set foot on the small cement porch, the door opened, letting out a trickle of radio music. A tall spare man in a dressing gown stood in the light. "Laura?" he said.

"Good morning, Dad," she answered. "Your daughter got in a little trouble tonight."

The tall man held the screen door open. He had heavy gray hair and gray eyebrows accenting a tan, lined face. Walter James couldn't see that the lines indicated any character, one way or another.

"Dad, this is Mr. James. Mr. James, my father."

"Your daughter wasn't personally involved in any trouble, Mr. Gilbert," explained Walter James. "She just happened to be the only witness to an odd happening."

"And Mr. James was kind enough to bring me home from the police station."

"It's pretty late, Laura," said Mr. Gilbert. He said the words disinterestedly, almost perfunctorily. Walter James looked at him sharply.

"Dad, the police work all night," the girl explained with elaborate patience. "A man was killed and they didn't feel

like waiting for me to get my sleep so I'd look pretty for their questions." She added, "Mr. James is a detective."

The old man regarded Walter James more closely. "I'd ask you in, Mr. James, but you can understand—at this hour——"

"Naturally," said Walter James. "I'll see you again."

Mr. Gilbert closed the door on his daughter's "Good night." Walter James stared for thoughtful seconds at the closed door before turning back to his car.

Walter James drove slowly down the deserted boulevard. Occasionally, off duty traffic signals threw lonely flashes of yellow light across his face. Once, as he turned through the ghostly brilliance of the Park Avenue intersection, he glanced in the rear view mirror critically. His face was smooth and bland, if a little sallow. Only small spiderwebs of wrinkles edged his eyes. "Thirty-eight," he said aloud. Then the scream and rattle of the Number 11 street-car snapped off his reverie; the rest of the way he drove quickly and deftly.

Once in his apartment, he turned the lock and hung his coat carefully in the closet. Then he sat down at the desk and took off his tie. His fountain pen scratched out three names on a piece of paper.

Laura Gilbert.

Shasta Lynn.

Ethel Lantz.

Suddenly, he crossed bold lines through the outside names and sat looking at the remaining two words. He lit a cigarette and puffed a cloud of smoke over the one last name. The cloud swirled a moment and melted away into the lengthening shadows of the room.

Shasta Lynn.

CHAPTER VII

AT PRECISELY eleven o'clock, Walter James pushed his slim hand against AUSTIN CLAPP—HOMICIDE and sauntered into the small office. Clapp was snuggling a telephone receiver against his head.

"... guilty as all hell. But it'll take time. Bye." He cradled the receiver and grinned broadly. "Just talking about you, James. Have part of a chair."

Walter James sat on the corner of the desk with one foot on the floor and lit a cigarette.

"Get a good night's rest?"

"What there was of it. Where's the girl? Didn't she come with you?"

"No. She didn't come with me. I told her to get some sleep and you'd call her if you needed her."

"That's okay, too," Clapp agreed. "A killing that doesn't break in twelve hours generally takes a week at least. Funny how that time lag always works out—must be mathematics."

"Did you get all your wires off to Atlanta and Denver?" the slender man asked. His blue eyes were intent on a hibiscus blossom nodding through the window.

Clapp squinted curiously. "Yes. What makes you so sure I wired Denver?"

"You're no fool, Clapp," Walter James said indulgently. "You figure that if my partner was following a lead to San Diego while on a trip to Denver, he might very well have had some ideas about Denver, too."

"Is that the way you figure?"

"That's the way we both figure."

"How long did you stop over in Denver on your way out here?"

"I didn't. I took Highway 66."

"Weren't you interested in Denver?"

"My lead was in San Diego. Also, I

have a saving nature. I'll let you send all the long and involved telegrams to the Denver authorities and charge it to the San Diego taxpayers."

"The taxpayers are getting their money's worth. The wires were long and involved all right." Clapp reared back in his chair and stretched. "Jesus! How I'd like a day off!"

Walter James smiled gently. "Why? This is your life work. What would you rather be doing?"

"Deepsea fishing. Like albacore?"

"I can't remember ever having any."

"Fine stuff." After a moment the big man brought his thoughts back to Walter James. "Well, you're anxious to know what happened this morning."

"I'm interested."

Clapp leaned forward and thrummed his big fingers on the green blotter. "I checked with Jim Crane. You know, he inventoried the audience last night. He says there were quite a few drunks but no one was reefed up. Course, if they'd been smoking the stuff and drinking, too, it'd be a little hard to tell. And he wasn't looking for that angle particularly."

"Were there any known characters in the house last night?"

"Only one that Jim found, and Jim's a pretty sharp boy. It was a jig that got mixed up in a straight edge brawl up at Front and Market a few months ago. But he was buried in the center section. Jim checked the customers all around him. Naturally, there were the usual number of drunk tank patrons."

"Any ex-Atlanta citizens drifted in here lately?"

"No. Not with guns on them at any rate." Clapp snorted. "You don't know our town very well. We got a tourist trade to keep up and they're not the kind that go for that sort of thing."

"Any of your local boys play with .45's?"

"No. And for the same reason. We don't have much of any gang trouble down here, James."

WALTER JAMES ground his cigarette out against the inside of the wastebasket and watched the sparks die out against the crumpled papers. "I'm just feeling around," he said.

"Well, glad to give you any background you feel you need," said Clapp. "Always glad to help a visiting kibitzer."

The two men looked at each other sardonically. Walter James spoke first.

"Clapp, you wouldn't tell me a thing if you didn't think I know more than I'm giving out. It's going to pay me to look guilty just so I'll have the key to your little lips. You're just trying to give me enough rope."

"I got plenty of rope," said Clapp agreeably. "Been saving it for years."

"Hell, you wouldn't know you had a case if I hadn't come along."

"I have to keep an eye on the record, my boy. If you hadn't come along, I'd only have one dead Filipino on my hands. Now, if your story adds up, I'm liable to have a dope ring raise its ugly head and pretty soon the newspapers, the City Council and the F.B.I. will be galloping single file right down my throat."

"That's a nice bit of whimsy," said Walter James. "But don't forget one main point. I'm not out here to mess up your neat little town. And I'm not out here to clean it up, either. As far as I'm concerned, San Diego is none of my business. My business is to get within tagging distance of the man who gunned out my partner."

"Because you were good friends with this Lantz or because his murder was a reflection on you?"

"If I answer that, can we get down to cases?"

"Okay."

"It's fifty-fifty. Now what's the deal on that theater manager?"

Clapp yawned and tapped his front teeth with his knuckle. "Greissinger is always willing to cooperate with the authorities. Consequently, he doesn't know anything. None of his boys and girls smoke reefers or do anything nasty. According to him, his show can play the grammar schools any week they want. Strictly a high type show but no publicity, please. You write the rest of it."

"Do you clear the whole cast?" Walter James asked.

"I never clear anybody till they die," remarked Clapp. "You're thinking of the Lynn wench, aren't you?"

"She has the strongest connection with the Filipino. The Filipino has the strongest connection with Dr. Boone. And whoever Dr. Boone is, I want to talk with him. What did you think of Shasta Lynn?"

"Little dignified for a strip dancer. Got a fine body, hasn't she? And she dresses pretty well." Clapp pursed his thick lips. "Maybe the Filipino had no connection with her outside of bugging his eyes out at that body. You know how the little dark boys go for the big blondes."

"Ethel Lantz was a big blonde," remarked Walter James. "And now she isn't with us anymore."

Clapp frowned. "You trying to make a connection there?"

"No. Just happened to think of it. What did you think of our naked friend's alibi?"

"Madeline? It seemed to be all right, though I wouldn't trust either one of them as far as I could sling the Coronado ferry. Greissinger says they're okay, if that means anything. They live together in a place out in La Mesa."

WALTER JAMES broke into a fresh pack of cigarettes, slicing off the top neatly with his fingernail. "Do either of the girls smoke what we hope they smoke?"

Clapp shrugged. "You want to ask them?"

Walter James smiled. "It's a ticklish question to ask when you haven't anything to go on and when you're on the city's payroll."

"You're not kidding," said Clapp. "I almost got my face slapped a couple of times last night." He stared gloomily at the desk blotter. "That's a happy little family down there at the Grand."

"Anything on Danny Host?"

"Nothing in the local files. I'm checking with Washington." The big man drummed on the desk with a yellow pencil. "I'll bet Dixie Lake has a black eye, at least, today. Our comedian didn't look very amused with her." He pointed the pencil at Walter James. "And speaking of females, what do you think of Laura Gilbert's reason for being at a burlesque show last night?"

"You seemed to let it pass," answered the smaller man. "You gave her a sweet enough lecture about it."

"I asked what you thought about it."

"It'll set with me. After all, she has no connections with this case except that the Filipino happened to die almost in her lap. Right?"

"I always look for two reasons for everything," said Clapp. "Sometimes three. I wish I knew who the marksman last night was shooting at. Laura Gilbert or Walter James?"

Walter James walked over to the window and looked at the nodding blossom. "This thing's about the same color as the blood on her ear. What kind of flower is it?"

"That's a hibiscus. Only flower I recognize—outside of roses and lilies,"

commented Clapp. "Well?"

Walter James turned. "Clapp, that's been my favorite question all morning. Was it the Gilbert girl because somebody thought she saw him knife the Filipino? Or was it me? It would have been easier to bag me in Atlanta. There's no point in making me drive three thousand miles to be a bobbing target. That phone call I got makes a more logical tip than a trap."

"You're right there," said the big man. He reached under his blotter and pulled out a mimeographed form. "You're probably interested in the lab check we ran on the .25 that shot at you."

"Didn't know you'd have it this early. Did you get enough dirt out of the gun to give you anything to work with?" Walter James scanned the report thoughtfully.

"Plenty. The gun was full of everything but marijuana."

"It's a crime to let a gun get that way." Walter James pointed a finger at the report. "What's this stuff here with the chalk base?"

"This will floor you, son. Face powder. Cheap face powder."

The slender detective frowned. "Well, well, well."

Clapp laughed gustily. "Boy, I hope your love life's in perfect order. Cause that gun has recently been carried around in a woman's purse."

"Any way of telling the brand of powder this is?"

"Too cheap. Might be any of a dozen cheap brands."

Walter James let the report float down onto the green blotter.

"I know what you're thinking and I've done it," said Clapp. "It isn't any face powder that Shasta Lynn has in her dressing room—she uses pretty expensive stuff. But it could be her body powder. The tests run pretty close.

But then again it could be practically any dime store brand. It's an interesting discovery but not very damn conclusive."

"And because a woman carried the gun, it's no sign that a woman used it last night," added Walter James. "Incidentally, I'll want this gun returned when the city is through with it. And I'll appreciate the city keeping it cleaned for me."

"The city's pleasure," said Clapp. "Anything else?"

"Yes, I'd like my .38 back and a license to carry it around here."

"Not a chance, James. It'd make me look pretty silly if you do turn out to be a mass murderer and I've given you a gun license. No, thanks!"

"That's all right," said Walter James. "I got plenty of others. But I don't want to be picked up for carrying any one of them."

"You won't be as long as you don't make it go bang. And if any self-defense matters pop up, you better have a witness, James. And it better be me."

"That's the friendly attitude I expected." He pulled a snub-barrelled .32 from inside his coat and flipped it over in his hand. "Baby, you'd better not speak to anyone or your daddy'll get the gas chamber."

"James," said Clapp pleasantly, "you got more guts than a grandfather clock."

Walter James slid the gun out of sight. "You'll call me?"

"Or send a squad after you. All depends on how my dinner sets."

"See you soon." Walter James ambled casually out of the office. In the Buick, he lit another cigarette and drove out of the parking lot in front of police headquarters up Market Street, away from the harbor. At Third Street he turned left and pulled into

a parking place. He got out of the car and paced back to Market Street.

THE front of the Grand Theater was lifeless under the high noon sun. The blue wooden doors were hasped shut with big padlocks. A sign in the lobby said Matinee Sunday Only 2 O'Clock.

Walter James stood for a moment and looked thoughtfully at the full-length picture of Shasta Lynn. The slug in her navel had been dug out, leaving a gaping, splintery hole. The shreds of glass had been swept up carelessly.

"I wonder," said Walter James very softly. He squinted his eyes, then turned and looked across Market Street to where the shot had been fired. A moving van cut off his vision and halted his train of thought.

He walked over to the box office and looked through the glass. On the floor, leaning against the inside wall, was a sign saying, We Rest On Monday. Still sauntering, Walter James moved out of the lobby and into the narrow passageway between the buildings that led to the stage door.

Repeated banging on the big iron doors brought the sound of muffled footsteps from inside. One door opened with a clank and a rusty growl. The old janitor looked at him suspiciously.

"What d'ye want?" he wheezed.

Walter James indicated with his head. "Take a look around. Open up."

"Another one of 'em, eh?" The old man spat disgustedly. Tobacco juice had dried in the corners of his mouth. "Don't you fellers ever see enough?"

"Come on, Pop," said the slender man. "I'm not working by the hour. Open it up."

The janitor stood aside. Walter James squeezed past him and went up three concrete steps to the stage.

Re-echoes of his footsteps rang against the brick walls. He looked up into the tangle of ropes hanging from the grid.

The old man called after him suspiciously. "You come from the police station?"

"That's right," said Walter James truthfully. He held the blue velveteen drapes aside with his arm and stepped out onto the empty stage.

Light from an indiscernible skylight in the distant ceiling threw a dim radiance over the stage. The flats used as settings for the show were piled, apparently haphazardly, against the brick wall in the rear. Walter James looked out at the house. Empty seats stared at him. Music stands and folding chairs were strewn about the orchestra pit. Somebody had eaten an orange and left the peel in a neat little pile on the runway.

Walter James went down the wooden steps and up the aisle slowly, his head turning first to the right and then to the left. He went past the seat where he had watched Shasta Lynn's number and sat down in the aisle seat of the last row.

The old janitor looked in at him from the lobby. "That's right where it happened, ain't it?"

Walter James patted the seat to his right. "Right here, Pop. The murderer sat right where I'm sitting now."

The old man chuckled. "He was a smart one, that feller. You won't catch him."

"You never know," said Walter James soberly.

"Mark my words," the janitor said, stabbing at him with an emphasizing forefinger. "You won't catch him. He was a smart one." He nodded his head vigorously and shuffled off into the lobby. "No, sir," Walter James could hear him saying as he went, "you won't catch him, not that feller."

SILENCE lay across the Grand Theater like a blanket. The slender detective looked at the stage and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Then he slipped out of the seat and got down on his hands and knees. He fumbled in his pocket for a match.

Two minutes went by. Three. At the end of five, Walter James rose and dusted his hands. He brushed the knees of his trousers carefully. His usually impassive face was lighted by a smile.

He was still smiling as he strode down the aisle and remounted the stairs to the stage. His actions were quick, purposeful now. He crossed to the stage-door side, brushing aside the drapes with a quick movement. Backed up against the wall of the theater were three tiny dressing rooms. Tinsel stars were thumbtacked on the doors.

Walter James lit a match to read the typewritten slip scotch-taped to the first door. Danny Host. The middle dressing room was apparently unoccupied. The third door had "Miss Lynn" painted in conservative black letters across its plywood surface.

The door was unlocked. He slipped in and shut it behind him. The room was tiny, not more than six by eight, most of its space taken up by a cheap enameled dressing table. The table was backed against the brick wall of the theater; the other three walls were unfinished plywood.

He was kneeling down to examine the contents of the lowest drawer when the door handle in back of him turned. Walter James was on his feet, facing the door, his hand resting lightly on the butt of his .32 when the door opened.

"Well, well," said Walter James. "How are you today, Mr. Host?"

Danny Host's startled face looked at him blankly. The comic had shed his trench coat; he was wearing a green

slipover sweater and tweed trousers of a rather expensive pattern.

"Say," he said, "you scared me."

"Sorry," said Walter James. He took his hand away from the .32 and fumbled for his cigarettes. "Did you make a mistake about which was your dressing room?"

Host's eyes shifted. "Yeah. That was it. Yeah." His mouth moved nervously. "It's pretty dark, you know. I made a mistake. I guess I was thinking about something else. You know how that happens sometimes."

Walter James breathed smoke at the roof. "Sure."

Host said, "Well, I—I guess I'd better get ready for the show."

"You're early."

"Yeah. I—I like to take plenty of time. Well, I'd better be going." Walter James inclined his head. Host stood indecisively. Walter James looked drowsily at his cigarette.

Host said, "Have they found anything yet? I mean, do they know—"

Walter James stood up and looked at him steadily. "What are you holding back, Host?"

"Nothing. Nothing. I'm not holding back anything."

Walter James shrugged. "Have it your way." He moved toward the door. Host backed out of the dressing room before him. Walter James glanced around at the deserted wings and stage and went down the concrete steps to the iron doors.

The tall comedian followed him as far as the iron railing. His lean face looked ashen in the dim light. "I'm innocent," he said.

The slender detective grinned up at him sardonically. "Save it for the jury," he advised.

He pushed open the heavy door and went out into the fresh air. Walter James took his hand out of his trousers

pocket and looked at the small square of dirty white there. It read:

EVERETT BON
Neuro-Psy
Moulton
Building

CHAPTER VIII

THEY sat contentedly in the Sky Room of the El Cortez Hotel and waited for their drinks. Behind them a huge plate glass window reflected the pink-lighted oval bar, white jacketed waiters, naval officers and business men and their women. Conversation was comfortably relaxed, in library voices. Walter James half turned and put his head close to the glass; the reflections disappeared. Below him the lights of the city stretched in converging broken lines to the harbor where they merged with a puzzle of ship lamps and signal beams. A faint fog was drifting in, obliterating the outlines of destroyers and merchant ships and fishing boats, but the silhouettes of most of the hotels and banks were clearly upthrust against the night. He turned back to the girl.

"Nice view," he commented.

"You'll get used to it," she said.

He smiled. "You really think I'll be here that long?"

"I guess it's not any of my business."

The waiter silently placed two brimming glasses on the round cork scooters in front of them and murmured "Thank you, sir" to the slender man's money.

"I have no plans," said Walter James. "You know my business for the next week or so. After that I don't know."

"The next week or so?" She laughed. "Will it all be over so soon? What if nothing more happens? What if it's all over now and you have nothing to go on?"

"Miss Gilbert," he answered all four questions. "The beauty of this racket is that if nothing happens, you go out and make it happen. What did you say this drink was?"

"Tequila stinger. I'm saving you money — you don't need many of these."

He sipped at it, let it bite his tongue. "There's always somebody's hand to force."

"You won't call me Miss Gilbert so primly after a couple of these." She wrinkled her nose at him. "There. That's forcing *your* hand."

"Laura?"

"That's not the best. I like my middle name best, though nobody else does. Kevin."

"Kevin," he said over his glass. "To Kevin—and Heaven. May they always rhyme."

Her smile held a touch of bitterness. "I'll drink to that." They each took a long sip. "You shouldn't have fed me so much tonight, Walter. I told you I was a fiend for roast duck. Does it show?"

He looked sideways at her slim upright body, covered softly with plain green wool. "No, ma'am."

"Good," Kevin said relievedly, and pressed down her dress. "I worry about my tummy like I do my ears. I'm always afraid something is sticking out."

"Anything I can think of to say right now would only get me in trouble," said Walter James lightly. "Incidentally, how's our ear?"

"It's a little soon after dinner to discuss, but our ear is beginning to scab over nicely. I took the bandage off just before you picked me up tonight. Of course, I'll have to wear my hair this way for a while."

"I won't mind—believe me."

"I believe you." She finished her drink. "You won't be around long

enough to get tired of it."

WALTER JAMES signalled the waiter with an empty glass. "You never can tell." Kevin looked up quickly, her eyes glinting. They sat silently in the soft swirl of other couples' conversations until the waiter needlessly wiped off the table and deposited two more stingers.

"I have no plans," said Walter James. "But that won't automatically exclude me from San Diego, will it? You have no plans yourself."

She smiled. "You can't tell about us women."

He widened his pale blue eyes. "At three o'clock this morning you were an adolescent. By your own admission."

"Well, sir," she said, sticking out her lower lip, "I've had a hard day."

"Was it?" Walter James asked soberly. "Was there much reaction?"

"Not too much." She crinkled her brow. "This morning I was tired, naturally, and I guess I was a little sick. But it wasn't too bad."

"I'm glad," he said. She glanced to see if he meant it. "I've seen tougher women go under at the sight of a body. No one ever gets completely hardened to dead bodies, though lots of professional people pretend."

Her glance held a touch of shyness. "There's one thought I can't get rid of. What about his funeral? People like that Filipino can't have much money. If he has relatives, it'll take so much to have him buried." She stroked the stem of her glass and pondered the thought. "Oh, I guess there must be some place they put dead people that have no money."

Walter James pursed his lips. "There's a lot I don't suppose you know about the mortuary racket. No good funeral parlor ever refuses a family a casket and a decent funeral

for a man—even if there's no money in it at all. For one thing, they can't afford to—word would get around that they're mercenary and a few rumors like that will put a mortician out of business. Their business is founded on sentiment and no breath must touch it. A cheap funeral costs around a hundred and twenty-five dollars, but if the relatives have no money, they'll do it for seventy-five or fifty or even nothing."

She was watching him curiously. "No. I didn't know that. It sounds—well—humanitarian. It doesn't sound possible in this day and age."

"It's humanitarian—and it's business, too, like I said. However, very few people will accept a free funeral. They almost always insist on paying something. Just to save their pride."

"I didn't know that," Kevin mused.

"And you'll admit it's a hell of a topic for our first evening together," he concluded brusquely.

"Well, it isn't exactly our first evening."

"I refuse to count the one at the police station."

She pulled her green shoulders back in a little stretch. "Did Mr. Clapp miss me today? Did you bulldoze him properly?"

"Oh, he agreed that you were better off in your bedroom than in his office."

"What did you talk about? Is there anything you can tell me?" She asked the question like an eager little girl. She leaned across the table toward him.

Walter James shrugged his slim shoulders. "There isn't much to tell. Clapp would rather not believe there's a good sized dope ring breathing down his neck, but I'll give you odds that right now the vice squad is hauling in every known addict and breaking into every weed parlor north of the border. He's not ready to take my word for

anything — of course, I haven't anything conclusive to show him—but he isn't taking any chances. Clapp's a smart cop."

"I like him," Kevin said warmly.

"I like all smart operators—including cops."

"I can't get over it! I feel like I'm living in a mystery story. I wonder who shot at me? I hope it was somebody interesting." Her eyes bubbled across the table at her companion.

Walter James laughed. "Anybody with a gun is interesting—believe me. And, of course, there's the same old question: were they throwing bullets at your ear or mine? We've pretty well established the only reason the mystery man would be gunning for you."

HE HAPPENED to be looking at the girl as he spoke. Her face stiffened, then quickly resumed a look of interest. He reached over and pressed the back of her hand with his forefinger.

"Kevin," he said gently. She didn't look at him. "You'll have to tell somebody sooner or later. I hope I'll be the one you'll trust. You see, Clapp doesn't completely believe the reason you gave him for being at the Grand Theater."

Kevin turned toward him defiantly. "Oh, you're so darn smart!"

Walter James withdrew his hand. "I don't know what you have to tell. The way things stand right now, I don't want to know until you're ready. I don't think there'll be any more attacks if we're careful. There was a cop wandering around your house all night and all day today — so you needn't worry about that. I don't think he's with us now because I told Clapp to keep a tail off me. Besides, a cop in a bar stands out like a monument; they're so leary of drinking on duty, it makes them conspicuous."

Her fingers touched his briefly. "I'm sorry," she said. Her eyes had a glister that reflected the bar lights. "Later. I'll tell you a little later. Not now, Walter."

"And, conceding that there is a dope mob operating from this town, just what was the Filipino's connection? He wasn't the leader type. He might have been a distributor but he wasn't carrying reefers which is about all they trust the distributors with. He might have been a quick go-between that they kept a close eye on—that would explain that box of straight marijuana. But if this deal stretches clear back to Atlanta, the box doesn't fit. It wasn't big enough. In a cross-country racket, you have to ship a pretty good sized quantity at a time. That builds the profit and cuts down the risk. You can't ship hundreds and hundreds of separate quinine boxes full."

"What would a worthwhile shipment of marijuana be like?" Kevin asked. "I don't know a thing about it."

"About a shoebox full of the straight stuff," said Walter James. "That's big enough to show plenty of profit but not so big as to attract attention. And it could be packed in a million different disguises."

"Such as?"

"Oh, flea powder, brown sugar, cosmetics. The odds are a thousand to one against the postal authorities breaking that far into a well-known trade name. You could use anybody's containers." He laughed suddenly. "Do I sound like an authority?"

"I guess in the private detective business you learn about a lot of unusual things."

"They're not unusual for the business. But remember, the cops, and consequently private detectives, deal with the odd one percent of the population. I hope you're ready for an-

other glass of this dynamite. I am."

She smiled. "I'm always ready."

HE WAVED his glass in another signal. The waiter darted toward them.

"But you haven't figured out the Filipino's job yet," Kevin reminded him. "Why wasn't he carrying the shoebox with him?"

"I think he was a go-between," Walter James said thoughtfully, "but I don't think he was stabbed during a delivery. The stabbing was risky enough even in a darkened theater. But to stick a knife in a man, in the short period of grace the murderer had, and to hijack a box, too—well, that's pushing your luck a little far. No, I think what he had in his pocket was part of a main shipment he was holding out for private purposes. Either to use himself or to sell or give to a friend. If he was a go-between, I doubt if he smoked himself—you don't use addicts for bigtime go-betweens."

Kevin said, "Who was the little box for?"

"I wish I could be sure," Walter James said softly. Kevin watched a frown carve his smooth face. He looked up to catch her watching him. She said quickly, "Do you think he was killed because you were in the theater?"

"I hope so," he said. "If that's the reason, then I'm on the right track. I haven't particularly tried to keep undercover since I hit town. I was hoping to be recognized; more things happen that way." He paused. "You look a little tired. If you want to go home—"

Kevin protested. "No. Really, I'm not tired—just a little worried, maybe. Maybe this liquor's making my face droop. I'm really having a lot of—well, I guess with your friend and that Filipino dead I shouldn't call it fun—

but I am enjoying myself. Your voice is very soft and reassuring, Walter. So are your eyes."

"That's good," the slender man smiled. "I'm trying to build an appearance of trustworthiness to hide my serpent's heart. Then when I've got you good and plastered, you'll fall all over my shoulder."

She smiled provocatively at him. "Or vice versa. You don't know my capacity. I'm ready for another if you are."

Her hand was palm down on the table top. He toyed with the back of it idly, running his fingertips over her knuckles and between her fingers. She watched the proximity of their hands gravely.

"Well, you warned me—you told me we'd get along. If Bob could only see me now."

"Is he a jealous boy?"

"You hit the right term — jealous boy. He's twenty."

Walter James gave a flat laugh. "Which puts that neat gap of nineteen years between you and me again." He stopped moving his hand. Kevin caught at it.

She said softly, "Walter, I can't help being born a little late. I'm trying not to show it."

Walter James sucked in his breath. "Time for another cigarette." He took the last one from a battered crumple of paper and cut into a fresh pack for her. After a long puff of smoke, he held up the unlighted end of his cigarette. "Generally, marijuana looks pretty much like tobacco—a little dirtier in color, maybe. But it's possible to refine it down and get something more powdery. Of course, you smoke either form. Just a little of the dust mixed with regular tobacco and it can't be told from an ordinary cigarette until you inhale. That makes it safer for

the user and, of course, the powder form is easier to transport, in addition to being more potent."

Kevin smiled gently. "Yes, teacher." She squeezed his hand encouragingly. "And what was our Filipino man doing with his?"

"Selling it to a friend. Or maybe not a friend. Maybe it was somebody he was crazy about, some woman he was trying to get somewhere with. Know who I'm talking about?"

The girl's wide mouth moved bitterly. "Shasta Lynn!"

"That's right—the odd woman with no clothes."

"Odd? You said that last night, Walter."

"Maybe you didn't notice. But something about her act—something was wrong."

"You mean she might have been full of marijuana—right up there on the stage? I thought her dance was disgusting."

"That was why you went to a burlesque show, wasn't it? To see something disgusting—something you were missing at San Diego State College?" The girl looked stonily at her fresh stinger as the waiter lowered it to the table. "Anyway," Walter James continued, "that wasn't what I had in mind. There was something else which I'm just sort of curious about."

"Walter."

"Yes?"

"Are you going to see Shasta Lynn yourself?"

Walter James gave her a slow smile. "Tomorrow."

Kevin fumbled in her purse, came up with a slip of paper. She laid it on the table by a little ring of liquid. "Here's her address." She took a long drink.

"I guess you're ready to tell me now," prompted Walter James softly.

The girl looked at him with eyes that brimmed unhappiness. "Don't laugh at me, Walter."

Walter James put his slender hand over hers. "You know I couldn't," he said.

Kevin bit the inside of her lip. "My father's having an affair with Shasta Lynn."

The detective's irregular features were solemn. Kevin scanned them anxiously. "I've been so afraid to tell anybody. I haven't known what to do."

Walter James' blue eyes were thoughtful. "I'm glad you told me, Kevin," he said gently. "It won't go any further, I promise you." The girl stared silently at the polished table. Walter James considered the bowed head with its carefully parted red hair. He gulped down the rest of his drink and stood up. "Let's go down to the car."

"I'll meet you by the elevator," Kevin said. "Little girls' room." She gripped his hand hard. "And thanks, Walter."

THEY rode down to the lobby in silence, staring soberly at the back of the operator's black coat. Kevin turned toward the revolving door that led to the street, but Walter James' hand on her arm stopped her.

"Walter, what is it?"

The slender man urged her away from the elevators and into the corridor where a neon sign pointed the way to the cocktail lounge before he answered. "I just have a naturally suspicious mind."

"But—"

"Sssh!" Walter James said and softened it with a smile. "There are times when redheads should be seen and not heard."

Kevin joined him in watching the

elevator doors silently. A silent minute went by. Two. Then the door of the second elevator slid open, disgorging another crowd from the Sky Room. Walter James watched the last of them troop through the revolving doors before he moved. Then it was to sigh softly.

Kevin's eyes were wide and sparkling. Her voice hit an upper register excitedly. "Walter!" she insisted. "What was it?"

He grinned at her. "Maybe it was just a trick to make you feel better," he said.

Her mouth sagged in disappointment. "You wouldn't do a thing like that, would you?"

Walter James let his face sober. "No, I wouldn't," he agreed. "You didn't notice him upstairs, then?"

"Notice who?"

"It's probably just a coincidence," mused Walter James softly, "but he left the bar as we got in the elevator and he was on the next one coming down—"

Kevin squeezed his upper arm hard in exasperation. "Walter! Who?"

"Oh," he said, his eyes coming back to focus on her impatient face. "I'm sorry. It was our evasive friend from the Grand Theater." He took her elbow and urged her toward the revolving door. "The popcorn vendor. The boy who tried to sneak out of the theater, you know. John Brownlee."

CHAPTER IX

THE Buick bore them quietly out the Eleventh Street gorge under the Cabrillo Bridge. Mixed eucalypti and evergreen rose shadowy on the canyon slopes of Balboa Park. Behind them the plate glass of the Sky Room showed as a red rectangle high in the sky. The fog was still a shy wispy thing that disappeared at the headlights' stab.

"Light up and tell me about your father and Shasta Lynn," prompted Walter James. "But first: are you sure?"

Kevin fumbled at the cigarettes. "Oh, I don't know! I'm not sure of anything any more. But I can't see what else it could be."

She set two cigarettes aglow and handed him one. "You see, Dad never goes out at night very much — never oftener than one night a week generally. He likes to sit by the radio all evening until he falls asleep. He's crazy about radio programs no matter what they are. He even has a radio going all day in his office, listening to the music over XEGC and those announcers with the horrible voices."

Walter James looked puzzled.

"That's a Mexican station down in Tijuana. And, of course, the announcers are Mexican and all have flat raspy voices."

"Does Shasta Lynn have a radio that particularly excites your father?"

"Please don't be funny," said Kevin, unhappily. "The radio has nothing to do with it. I was just trying to show you Dad doesn't lead a particularly wild life. But for the last few years he's been going out one night a week regularly—but not necessarily the same night every week. I never thought anything about it—I don't even remember whether he told me where he was going or not. I just figured it was some real estate business and didn't pay any attention. But one night about a month ago he told me he was going to a Chamber of Commerce meeting and the next day one of my professors was talking about the Chamber of Commerce and happened to mention their meetings were on an entirely different night." Her voice raced ahead as though she were anxious to get everything said. "The next week he said he

was going down to the Bowling Academy and mentioned something about getting interested in the game and needing the exercise. I went downtown and sat in the Academy all evening. Dad never showed up."

"Hell, a man has a right to change his mind," said Walter James amiably.

"But for the last three weeks he's used the Bowling Academy excuse and he never goes there."

"But, Kevin—have you ever followed him to a woman?"

"No," she said. "I've been ashamed of what I've done already."

Walter James said carefully, "Please don't be offended by this, Kevin—but isn't it his own business?"

She spoke as if she had asked and answered the question many times to herself. "You mean that I'm old enough to know what life is all about?"

"Something like that."

"Walter, I'm not trying to pry into Dad's life. We've never been awfully close. I've got too much imagination for him. But we always have been on the level with each other and—and—I don't want to see him get mixed up with the wrong people. People like Shasta Lynn."

"Just how does Shasta Lynn fit into this?"

SHE rolled down the window and tossed her cigarette out. The inrush of air rippled her coppery hair. She leaned her head against the back of the seat and closed her eyes wearily.

"This is where I really seem silly," she admitted. "I got some crazy idea that he was in financial trouble. I guess I acted like he was some cheap bank clerk absconding money from God knows where. Anyway, I've had a semester of accounting, so I checked his books. If it had been anything involved, I wouldn't have found it. But

the books are simple and they fairly shouted at me."

"What did they say?"

"Two months ago Shasta Lynn got a house in La Mesa from my father. She didn't buy it; he just gave it to her. And paid the man who owned the house out of his own pocket. It was right in his bank book."

Kevin sat up straight. "He's keeping her, Walter. For the last two months Dad's been drawing money out of the bank. A whole lot more than we use for the household expenses and our spending money. Don't you see?"

Walter James wrinkled his smooth forehead. "I'm not sure what I see. Is that why you went down to the Grand? To see Shasta Lynn?"

The girl nodded. "I don't know whether I went just to look at her and see what she was like or whether I was going to be silly and try to talk to her." She laughed harshly. "I don't know what we'd talk about. I guess it's hers and Dad's own damn business."

Suddenly, she started to cry. "But why didn't he tell me? Why does everything have to be so sordid?" She broke down into sobs and put her face in her hands. "Why isn't Mom here?"

Walter James reached over and stroked her silky hair gently. "Don't worry about it, Kevin. I'm glad you told me instead of the police. Not that the cops take any interest in things like that. Your father hasn't committed any crime by giving money to Shasta Lynn. Nobody can prove what for. I'm glad you told me because now I can keep an eye out. Shasta Lynn's in this thing up to her neck, but there's no reason for your father to be involved."

She looked at him pleadingly. "Do you think you can keep him out of it?"

"I'll do my best. I don't think it will be too tough."

"What are you going to say to her tomorrow?"

"That depends on what she says to me. I don't have much to go on. My only angle is this: the Filipino was crazy about her. If she isn't actually tied up with this dope mob herself, maybe Fernando Solez spilled something to her. You know how guys in love are."

Despite her misty eyes, she grinned roguishly. "No. How are they?"

"Ask your Bob sometime. At any rate, I'm going out there and scare the hell out of her. Maybe something'll happen. God, how I hope she can give me a lead on Dr. Boone! That's the only link with Atlanta."

For a couple of minutes they spun down El Cajon in silence. Scattered car lights cut through the gathering fog; there were street lights and drive-in lights and lights from coffee and doughnut shops that lit Kevin's face briefly as they sped by. Walter James looked at her; she was wan and solemn, but she looked lovelier than he had ever seen her.

She sensed his eyes and instinctively stretched her green skirt over her knees. Then she smiled faintly.

"Girlish, aren't I? Walter, was it Dr. Boone who shot at us?"

"If Dr. Boone carried that .25 in his purse and got his face powder all over it."

"Powder? Was that on the gun?"

He nodded. "That's it. A cheap brand that could be any woman's. It even matches the body powder that Shasta Lynn keeps in her dressing room."

Her eyes widened. Walter James noticed for the first time that they were a burnt brownish color. "Shasta Lynn! But she wouldn't be carrying body powder around in her purse." She grinned suddenly. "Even she must have

some sense of decency. You can't powder all over in public."

"Very true."

"But if it had been kept in her dressing table drawer, the gun could have gotten powder on it."

"Which immediately brings up the problem: how did my gun which I gave to Hal Lantz get in Shasta Lynn's dressing table drawer?"

HE WHEELED the car around in front of her house and cut the motor. She pondered the problem till they reached the front porch. Finally, she said, "I don't know."

"Don't worry about it. The pieces never fit together right away. And when you've finished you generally find most of the pieces are missing, anyway, and you've made wild leaps from one to another till you reached a conclusion. The conclusion smart cops draw is that they're not so smart as they are lucky."

"I won't be able to think about anything but guns and murder at school tomorrow. Not that my grades are so much, anyway."

"Get a good night's sleep—that's the main thing." The slender man jerked his head at the black shape of a car parked across El Cajon a half block away. "You don't have to worry. There's your bodyguard."

The girl sighed. "That's reassuring. I feel like nothing can go wrong. It's like having a guardian angel watching over you." She patted his hand. "I've had a wonderful time, Walter."

"I'll see you tomorrow night," he stated.

"Will you? It was an unguarded exclamation of pleasure rather than a question. She swung the door open into the darkened house.

"I couldn't help it," Walter James said gently. She stood looking at him. The centers of her eyes were cups of

warmth. The silence of the night was broken only by a car stopping across El Cajon.

"Don't, Walter," she said, ending the communion. "I mean—don't kiss me. Not tonight. After the things we've talked about. This isn't the night for it."

He kissed the pale shape of her hand instead.

"Good night."

"Good night. See you tomorrow."

The dark shape by the palm tree jolted him from pleasanter thoughts. "Yes?" he said.

The shape became a man in sport coat and open throat shirt. "You're Mr. James?" The voice was unsure, slightly immature.

"That's right."

"I'm Newcomb—I go with Laura."

Walter James relaxed. "Oh, sure," he said. "You're Bob. Come on to the car." Seated, he watched the youth's profile. "Cigarette?"

"No, I don't use them."

"Well?"

Newcomb looked at him nervously. "Mr. James, you probably think it's none of my business—but what are you doing with Laura?"

"What do you think I'm doing?"

The boy moved his head uneasily. "I don't know. Suddenly, you show up and Laura doesn't even know I'm around. She broke our date tonight to go out with you. She won't tell me anything."

"I haven't done a thing to harm her, if that's what you're worried about," Walter James told him coldly.

Newcomb looked miserably at his hands. "It's not that so much. It's just that Laura's a funny girl. Moody, kinda flighty. She's got to get over that if she's going to be happy."

Walter James quirked his mouth briefly. "Look, kid. The best way

for people to be happy is to mind their own business."

A cold silence seeped into the car.

"I didn't think you'd understand," said Newcomb stiffly, after a moment.

"But you tried," Walter James said, irony heavy in his voice. "And now no matter what happens you can always say—I did my best."

"You think you're pretty clever, don't you?"

Walter James turned the ignition key. "That handle right there opens the door." Newcomb got out, clumsily, without a word. Walter James stepped on the starter.

"Goodnight," he said pleasantly. "And take my advice, junior. Don't play with the big kids—they play rough and you might get hurt." He let out the clutch and left Newcomb standing at the curb.

CHAPTER X

THE Monday morning sun warmed his pale hand as it lay along the Buick window opening. A little more of this, he thought, and I won't look so much like a bookkeeper. He grinned at himself in the rear view mirror and nearly roared through a violently red traffic stop. As the motor idled, he glanced over to see what street this was. College Way.

A big black and white sign pointed left to San Diego State College. About a mile over Walter James could see the college tower, thin and square and brilliantly white, probing the hot sky. Kevin had mentioned at dinner the night before that September was sometimes the hottest month of all. He unfastened the shirt button under the knot of his tie.

The signal glared green and four miles later he was in La Mesa. The town was small and peaceful, hunched

at the foot of steep mounded hills. It took about fifteen minutes of diligence to locate the address Kevin had given him.

He was straining to see the street numbers when a black sedan brushed by his Buick, traveling in the opposite direction. Walter James looked quickly in the rear view mirror, but the car was already disappearing over a rise of ground. Oh well, he thought, there are probably a lot of thin men with hawk faces around here; it probably wasn't Danny Host at all.

Shasta Lynn's house was a one-story beige stucco that sprawled a hundred yards away from the road behind a scattered row of eucalypti. Most of the front was glass paned, the interior hidden by striped monks-cloth drapes. He wheeled the car up the red dirt driveway and stopped by the front door. There was no front porch; three red cement steps led up from the driveway and there was the door. He got out and walked around the car.

Walter James stopped on the first step. The front door was open now and Shasta Lynn stood in it. "Yes?" she asked.

She stood much as she had when she was singing on the stage Saturday night—very still and erect, with long-fingered hands lying quietly along her thighs. Blonde hair still swung around her shoulders. She was wearing a house dress of some blue coarse material that complimented her body. Evidently, there was little underneath it.

"I'm Walter James. Dr. Boone sent me."

There was a movement in the house behind her.

"I don't know of any Dr. Boone," Shasta said steadily.

Walter James smiled. "That's what I was told to tell you," he said. "Suppose we go inside and discuss it."

He heard a door close softly in the house.

"I can't see why we should." The woman was an imperturbable statue.

"It's for your own good, Shasta," said the slender man, starting up the steps. "Especially now that the Filipino is dead."

The buttons of his coat brushed her; she pulled her body back against the doorjamb and Walter James walked into the house. Shasta shut the door. He tossed his hat on a table by the end of a Monterey divan and sat down. The monks-cloth drapes were porous and let a filtered quantity of sun into the room which stretched across the front of the house. It was a large room, well appointed, with knotty pine walls. The floor was wine colored, of some linoleum-like substance, spotted here and there with throw rugs. A cheerful room, had it been garbed in sunlight.

"Sit down, Shasta," said Walter James. He added, "And talk."

Her greenish, faintly slanted eyes probed at him. Skillfully, she slipped the connections of the door chain together without a glance toward it. Her walk toward him was the same she had used on the stage of the Grand Theater, calculated, bizarrely seductive. Walter James sensed the same wrongness he had felt during her dance. Confined in this low-ceilinged room of faded sunlight, the feeling began to resolve into understanding.

SHASTA sank onto the woven cushion beside him, making no attempt to keep her ivory knees covered. Their roundness failed to reflect any gleam of the dim light, as though they were dusted with powder even now.

Curiosity began to thaw the coldness of her eyes. She parted her lips without showing her teeth. "Who told you

to tell me of Dr. Boone, Mr. James?"

"A friend in Atlanta."

"Atlanta? What was his name?"

"I don't know, Shasta. He just said he was a friend."

"Then I can't see how this concerns me." The eyes cooled again.

"Maybe yes, maybe no," said Walter James. "And by the way, what was Danny Host doing around here?"

Her face was blank. "Really, Mr. James, I don't seem to understand a thing you say." She rose lithely and swayed to the end table. Through flat eyes, he watched her pick up his hat with cool meaning. He smiled at her and unfastened the single button that held his sport coat together. He slid down on the small of his back in the cushions. The coat fell open.

"I won't rush off," he said lazily.

She looked scornfully at the leather band of his shoulder holster. "My, aren't we the big man!"

"Now that the Filipino is dead, what will you smoke?" asked Walter James idly.

Shasta replaced his hat on the end table and picked up a squat silver box. "Cigarettes," she stated. "Would you care for one?"

She opened the box; it was full of white paper cylinders.

"After you," said the slender man politely. She took one off the top. Walter James inserted a finger to the bottom of the box and fished one out of the last row.

"Light?"

"Thanks." She snapped the box shut, wandered to the other end of the davenport and sat down. "You were out front the night Ferdie was killed, Mr. James. Did you kill him?"

"No. I was sent from Atlanta to see Ferdie."

"I don't believe I know anybody in Atlanta."

"Think it over, Shasta. You have to make a new contact now that the Filipino is gone. An aristocrat like yourself doesn't want to fall back on ragweed."

She narrowed her eyes at him. Idly, he picked up the silver box and counted out the cigarettes on the cushion between them. When he reached eighteen, he stopped. The box was empty.

"And yours is nineteen and mine is twenty," he enlightened her. "A fresh pack. Probably doesn't mean a thing."

He produced a white envelope from his coat pocket. In the bottom of the cigarette box were a few grains of tobacco. He tapped the box empty into the envelope, sealed it and replaced it in his pocket.

"I'm not from the police, Shasta. I don't want to discuss you with them. Please don't force me to."

"I told the police everything I have to say."

Walter James stood up and lightly ground his fist against his palm. "Why didn't you tell them about Gilbert?" he said suddenly.

She was on her feet like a serpent striking. Her tongue was between her teeth.

"Then again—why should you? Why shouldn't Mr. Gilbert stay in business and provide that extra income? This is a hell of a fine house, Shasta, and we both know it. We both know what you and the Filipino shared."

Her hands were pressed against her thighs again. "Tell me, Shasta, was there much between you and Ferdie?"

"Don't you dare say that! Don't you dare think of it!" She burst at him. Walter James began to get the picture. He stepped toward her and stood close.

"Shasta, you need a new contact. I can furnish a new contact. And we could be very good friends." He ran

his palm the length of her bare arm. Blaze-eyed, she pushed away and rubbed the flesh he had touched.

"Don't touch me! You can't touch me and that crummy Gilbert can't touch me!"

HE HEARD a latch rasp behind him and he whirled. His fingers flicked the reassuring gun butt, then he dropped his hand. Madeline Harms stood in the doorway, the door swinging open behind her. Her mouse brown hair hung strandily down her back and she wore a blue silk kimono gathered loosely about her. She was barefoot.

"Is he hurting you, Shasta darling! I won't let him hurt you," the girl's slack mouth said. Her eyes were dilated and mostly white. In her hand she held a carving knife, pointed outward from her stomach.

"Madeline—go back! I can take care of this." It was a low intense command.

Madeline shook her head loosely and stubbornly, trying to keep her match head pupils fixed on the slender man. "Shasta needs my help."

Walter James glanced into the room from which the girl had appeared. Through the doorway he could see no furniture. A soft red carpet covered the floor to the walls. There was an ashtray on the carpet.

"Shasta needs Mr. Gilbert, too," he said slowly and carefully to the girl. He noticed a smear of white powder on the front of the kimono. "That is why Shasta has Mr. Gilbert come to her." He watched the blonde out of the corner of one eye.

Madeline bit the flesh of her hand between her thumb and first finger. Her eyes widened still further and shifted erratically to the other woman.

"Tell him that's not true, darling. Mr. Gilbert came to you just once,

didn't he? But little Ferdy knew too much about him. So we got lots of money. We got a beautiful house to live in." She focussed her gaping eyes on Walter James again.

She thrust the gleaming blade out and started toward the slender detective. Her steps were too long and unsure. Walter James brought the edge of his hand down swiftly across her wrist. The knife clattered to the floor, and he hit her openhanded on the side of the head. Madeline fell and rolled loosely across the wine-colored substance.

Shasta sobbed and knelt by the crumple of bare flesh and blue silk. "Madeline," she murmured wetly, stroking the mouse-colored hair. "Honey, did he hurt you? Tell me he didn't hurt you!"

Walter James picked up his hat and unfastened the door chain. "Thanks for the day, girls," he said and went out into the sunlight.

CHAPTER XI

THE wall directory of the Moulton Building showed BONIFACE, EVERETT, M.D., 413. Walter James studied the name for a moment before he entered the elevator.

"Four, please," he told the operator. He followed the arrows down the corridor. The floor seemed to be almost exclusively medical. Dr. Fierro, Dr. Dempsey, Dr. Carlyle, Dr. Boniface . . . The automatic door closer made a soft hiss as he entered. The room was only a cubbyhole.

The receptionist was scanning an appointment book. She was a heavy-set blonde with a protruding lower lip. She gave him a professional smile that didn't extend to her pale blue eyes. "Yes?"

"Walter James," he murmured.

"Do you have an appointment?" She turned the pages of the book, looking down.

"No—but tell Dr. Boniface that it's important."

The girl looked doubtful. "I'll tell him, Mr. James." She went into the next room in a rustle of starched whites. Walter James lit a cigarette and stared at his manicured nails. The receptionist reappeared.

"Will you have a seat in the waiting room, Mr. James? Dr. Boniface will see you in a moment."

"Thank you," said Walter James. The girl closed the door in back of him. He looked around the deserted waiting room. Its hush was that of a church. He looked for an ash tray and couldn't find one. The light on the low center table caught his eye.

"That's a hell of a light to read by," he said aloud. It bored into his head. The combination of mirrors that made up the lamp's framework condensed rather than diffused the light, intensifying the beam. No matter how he turned his head the light seemed to be pointing at his eyes.

Walter James was still staring at the light when a soft voice said in back of him, "Good afternoon, Mr. James."

"Dr. Boniface?" He felt relaxed, drowsy. It was an effort to think.

"I understand you have something important to see me about."

"Yes." What was it now? His mind refused to concentrate.

"Come into my office, won't you?"

Walter James followed a broad, blue-suited back into a dim office. Heavy velveteen drapes masked the windows. An electric fan made a soft monotonous whir in a far corner. He looked at Boniface, noticed the heavy, muscular frame now going to fat, the fleshy white face. Boniface's hands on the desk blotter were in contrast to his body,

slender and tapering with well-kept nails. A heavy ring with a black stone flashed malignantly.

"Now just lean back and relax," the soft voice said, soothingly. Walter James felt himself sinking deeper into the soft chair. He felt like sleeping. His eyes, drawn uncontrollably to Boniface's slender hands, caught sight of a rectangle of white tucked in a corner of the desk blotter.

Walter James shook his head. A business card! His mind began to claw its way back into the light.

"Just relax," the doctor was saying, his tones even and smooth. "You'll feel better if you'll just relax—"

Say something, Walter James' mind told him. Say something—anything—so that you'll hear your own voice again. He opened his mouth with a physical effort that made his ears ring.

"You ought to be on the stage," Walter James said hoarsely. "I haven't seen anything like you since Thurston." The sound of his voice broke the spell. He could look away from the hands and the black ring. He could look at the fleshy white face again.

Boniface didn't smile. "Is that the important something you had in mind, Mr. James?" His voice was as smooth as ever but Walter James could sense the irritation behind it. His mind began to pick up speed.

"You have to begin somewhere." He could feel perspiration cold on the back of his neck.

"Suppose you try the beginning."

"I came to you because Dr. Boone recommended you," said Walter James. He looked at Boniface squarely. The big man's face didn't alter.

"Indeed?" he said, "What is the nature of your problem, Mr. James?"

WALTER JAMES felt calm and cool again. The trembling in his

legs had stopped. "I have dreams," he told the doctor.

"Yes?"

"I keep dreaming of dead Filipinos, ones with knives in them."

Boniface turned slowly in his swivel chair, but kept his eyes on Walter James' face. His hands were out of sight in his lap.

"That's an unusual fixation. However, possibly we can trace it to its source. Have you any explanation to offer?"

"For the dream—or for the dead Filipino?"

"I'm interested in anything you want to tell me."

Walter James smiled, showing only the tips of his teeth. "Now isn't that peculiar, Doctor? I was just going to say the same thing to you."

There was a moment of silence. Boniface frowned. "Perhaps I'm a trifle confused, Mr. James. I understood that you had some important reason for seeing me."

"I did. But where you jumped the tracks was thinking it was important to me. It's not. It's important to you."

The big man's fleshy face split into a half smile. "Of course, Mr. James. Won't you tell me all about it?"

"I don't have to tell you about it. You know all about it. Fernando Solez was killed last night."

Boniface's poker face was perfect. "Yes?"

"The police will eventually get to you. They're slower than I am as a rule. Talk now and to me and I'll guarantee you'll have less trouble in the long run."

"What interest could the police possibly take in me, Mr. James?" Dr. Boniface asked him blandly.

The slender detective pulled the torn business card from his pocket and slid it across the polished desk. Boni-

face studied it politely, then handed it back to Walter James. "It's apparently half of one of my business cards."

"The other half was found in Fernando Solez' coat pocket." Boniface ran his tongue over his teeth thoughtfully. "I found this half wedged in the seat where he was killed."

Boniface said, "Mr. James, any professional man's cards circulate to some extent. I have no idea how this—ah—Fernando Solez obtained my card."

Walter James turned the card over. "And I'll bet you never saw the writing on the back, either." Boniface inclined his head gravely. "It says, when you put the halves together: 'I need another ounce immediately regular place.' Another ounce of what, Doctor?"

Boniface smiled at him. "You present an interesting case, Mr. James. I wish I could do something for you." He rose.

"Hard to get, huh?" Walter James said.

"I'm afraid that there is nothing I can do to help you. The delusion that you're suffering under is rather uncommon and beyond my efforts to alleviate."

Walter James got to his feet slowly. He brushed a piece of lint from the right knee of his trousers. "I'll bet you tell that to all your patients, Doctor."

"However," Boniface continued smoothly, "in case your dreams persist, I would suggest a good sleeping powder. Perhaps I might arrange a prescription for you." He held the door open for the slender man.

"Oh, I wouldn't want you to do that, Doctor," said Walter James and he smiled. "I like that dream. I'd miss it. But I'm thinking about running a double-feature tonight. One about a phony psychiatrist. Do you think you'd

be interested in that dream?"

"Not in the least, Mr. James. Good day."

"See you in jail, Doctor," Walter James said. "And, by the way, you really should get some magazines for that waiting room of yours. The Lienster machine looks kinda lonesome."

THE receptionist was just replacing the telephone into its cradle when Walter James stopped in front of her desk.

"Excuse me," he said. "Doctor Boniface wants you to run next door to Doctor Carlyle's office and borrow his book on *Erotic Psychophenomena*, by Blake."

The girl looked puzzled. "I shouldn't leave the office," she said. Walter James shrugged and looked disinterested. "What was that book?"

"*Erotic Psychophenomena*, by Blake."

"That's a new one on me."

The door had scarcely closed behind her white-stockinged legs before Walter James was behind the desk. He left the phone and pushed one of the buttons on the base experimentally. The third attempt rewarded him.

Boniface's voice said . . . "like it. How did he know so much?"

Another, and crisper, voice snapped at him. "Well, why call me? What am I supposed to do about it?"

"I wanted to warn you."

"I've told you before not to call me here."

"What are we going to do?"

"We're going to sit tight and do nothing. You're getting excited and that's just what this Walter James wants you to do. Nobody has any proof and they won't get it unless you get rattled."

"You're right, Major," Boniface said heavily. "You're right."

"I'll see you at the regular time. Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

Walter James was staring at the Renoir print on the wall when the receptionist came back. She said indignantly, Doctor Carlyle didn't have the book—he'd never even heard of it."

"Doctor Boniface was afraid it was out of print," Walter James said glibly. "Never mind. It was for me. I'll look in the bookstores." He started out the door. "Oh, by the way, there was a phone call for the doctor, but I didn't know how to switch it over to him."

The girl acquired a worried frown. "Did it sound important?"

"I don't know. It was a Major somebody—ah—I can't quite remember the name."

"Oh," she said and the frown vanished. "That was Major Rockwell. He and the doctor play golf together. He'll call again."

"Yes," said Walter James, "he probably will." He opened the door. "And thanks for everything."

CHAPTER XII

WALTER JAMES pushed through the heavy doors of the Brass Rail at Sixth and B streets. Clapp's back was the biggest one at the bar. The slender man strolled over to him, punched a finger into the blue gabardine over Clapp's kidney. Clapp shoved around on the stool.

"What's wrong with the foot of Market?" asked Walter James. "Law enforcement get dull?"

"Oh, hello, James. No, got kind of rushed this morning and couldn't whip out to lunch till now. You ought to know better than to poke a man there after three beers."

"Anything new? Hear from the East?"

"Give them time, James. The longer I wait, the more I'll learn. Try one of these dark beers. Good."

"Typical cop attitude," Walter James commented. "Drag that beer over in the corner and let's talk."

They reached the corner booth at the same time as the white-haired waiter. "Double vodka, water. Sandwich—rare beef. Want anything, Clapp?"

"Another dark beer."

The waiter hurried off. They sank into the stained-oak booth.

Clapp said, "We've pulled in every small time weed seller in town that we knew about. It was all two or three reefer stuff. We didn't get a line on any big dealing or anything going out of town."

"Naturally. What we're looking for isn't peddled around here—I don't think."

"The Filipino had it," Clapp pointed out. He drained the glass and wiped off his mouth. "We did a little good, though. Found a couple of parlors we didn't know about and closed them in a big quiet hurry. One of them was too close to the high school for comfort. I hope the city council doesn't hear about that!"

"Hoover High?" asked Walter James.

"No. Downtown. San Diego High."

"Oh." The waiter brought the sandwich, the beer and two glasses of clear liquid on a tray. Walter James tossed down half the vodka and took a gulp of water. "Had a bad morning. I've been out doing your dirty work for you." He began mouthing the sandwich.

"I've seen cows hurt worse than that and live," said the big man, eyeing the beef. "What particular kind of hell have you been raising?"

"I talked to Shasta Lynn."

"Did she talk back?"

"Enough."

"Did you catch her at the burlesque house?"

"This is the Grand's day off. I went out to La Mesa."

"Where does the dope angle tie in?"

Walter James gave a one syllable laugh. "If you could have seen that hopped up Madeline charge me with a butcher knife, you'd have seen the tie-in."

"You *have* had a busy day. I suppose Madeline's full of bullet holes right now."

"That's a nice vindictive point of view. Will it raise me in your opinion any to know I only slapped her down?"

"Not a hell of a lot," said Clapp.

"Here's the way I spell it. Ferdy was a very little man in the setup. Some big man delivered the stuff to him. The Grand Theater was the pick-up point. Ferdy passed on the stuff to another big man there. The two big men never had to come face to face or involve each other. Maybe they didn't even know each other."

"So the Filipino was a go-between. Then how—"

"But Ferdy wasn't a good little go-between. He was hot for Shasta Lynn. Maybe he knew her propensities—maybe he didn't. That part you buried with him. But the Filipino was holding out part of the delivery which he presented to Shasta Lynn—hoping that was the key to her affections."

"Does the Lynn girl smoke up?"

"Probably a little. I think mostly she was getting it for her friend. Madeline's pretty far gone." Walter James pulled the envelope out of his coat pocket and pushed it across the table. Clapp snatched it out of a beer puddle. "That's the scrapings from the girls' cigarette box. Your lab will probably find some traces of marijuana. They were awfully anxious to fill the box with straight cigarettes when I rolled

up to the front door."

CLAPP stuck the envelope in his pocket. "We'll run a test this afternoon."

"That doesn't affect the picture as I see it one way or another. I picked that up before I had my run-in with Madeline." Walter James finished the sandwich and tossed the crust on the plate.

"Do you think Shasta Lynn's one of the people we want?"

"No."

"Do you think the Filipino might have told her who he was dealing with?"

"I doubt it. I don't think the Filipino knew."

"Dead end?"

"Dead end." Walter James pulled the torn fragment of Boniface's business card from his pocket. He slid it face up across the table. "But here's a present for you."

Clapp said slowly, "That's the other half of the card we found in Solez' pocket. Where'd you get it?"

Walter James grinned. "You're going to hate me for this, Clapp. It was wedged in the seat where the body was found. I was interested in that card so I went over the place with a fine-toothed comb."

Clapp's eyes were cold. "I told Felix to search the place. I'll have to speak to him about that. And I might clip you at the same time for obstructing justice."

"Who's obstructing? I gave it to you, didn't I?" Walter James pointed out blandly. "I'll even give you some more help. Put those two cards together and you'll find it belongs to a doctor named Boniface, a psychiatrist in the Moulton Building."

Clapp took a billfold from his inside coat pocket and put the torn business card in it carefully. "We'll look him

up."

"I've done it already. I tried to scare him. He's an obvious quack with an office setup that comes straight out of Dr. Cagliari's cabinet. I didn't learn much except that he's got a guilty conscience. As soon as I closed the door in back of me, he was burning up the wires with a Major Rockwell."

"Oh?"

"Mean anything to you?"

Clapp frowned. "I can't see where it ties in with us, though. There was a suicide case a while back. One of the prominent families, so it was pretty well covered up."

"Rockwell?"

"We talked to him just as routine. A couple of the boys had the idea that there might be a blackmail angle, but we couldn't prove it. And even if we could, it wouldn't necessarily mean that Rockwell was in it."

Walter James squinted a reflective eye at his nearly empty vodka glass. "Still, the tie-in is interesting." He looked at Clapp. "What's Rockwell like?"

Clapp pursed his lips. "Big man. Retired army. Seems to have plenty of money—a big house, yacht and so on. He travels a good deal."

"Let me have a go at him first. He might be more talkative to me." Clapp shook his head slowly. Walter James scowled. "Don't be dumb, Clapp. We're whistling in the dark. All we can do is bluff and I'm good at that sort of thing."

Clapp said, "Make it fast. This case is dragging."

"Sure," said Walter James. "Sure." He spilled the rest of the vodka down his throat. Clapp smiled broadly.

"Coming back to Shasta Lynn again—did you know she's been putting a lot more money in the bank than she makes taking her clothes off?"

Walter James looked at the detective over his water glass. He took a sip and set it down gently. "No, I didn't," he said. "Where did it come from?"

"It's not on her bank account whether she made it off marijuana or whether she made it off blackmail."

"So," said Walter James, "maybe little Ferdy did tell her who one of the big men was." He let the thought roll around his mind a minute.

"And," continued Clapp, "did you know that Shasta Lynn bought that house in La Mesa from the Gilbert girl's father?"

The pale blue eyes slowly went flat. "Clapp—are you still trying to drag Kevin into this?"

"Kevin?" The corners of the big man's mouth quirked upward briefly. "James, are you trying to drag the Gilbert girl out of this?"

There was a pause while their glances threshed. Walter James relaxed first and felt for his cigarettes. "I'll tell you what," he said. "If you get any further along that angle, I'll buy you a big shiny brewery."

Clapp laughed easily. "I'll get that when I go to Heaven. You may be right. It may be just a coincidence. In this racket it's always some damn coincidence that screws up the works. Where's the check? I got to get back."

"I'll get it."

"No, you won't. I'll match you."

"Have it your way," said Walter James. "I'll match you."

CHAPTER XIII

THE sun was rimming the Point Loma hills as Walter James eased his Buick out Rosecrans Boulevard. A stiff breeze was blowing off the bay. He rolled the car window higher.

Past the small shopping center, he turned left and followed the street

toward the bay. A curved archway loomed ahead. The paint-chipped letters said EL REY YACHT CLUB. Two rows of straggly palm trees led toward a rambling frame building at the water's edge. Small piers jutted haphazardly out into the bay, each with its cluster of sailboats and motor launches.

The parking lot was deserted except for a new Chevrolet and a 1938 Dodge. Walter James parked his Buick next to the Dodge. The wind blew small fragments of sand against the windows. When he got out, it pulled his trousers tight against his legs.

He met a brisk young man in dungarees and yachting cap just outside the front door.

"I'm looking for Major Rockwell," Walter James said.

The young man pointed. "Follow that board walk around the clubhouse to the second pier and go right down to the end. He's on board his cruiser. The *Carrie II*. I think he's expecting you."

"Thanks," said Walter James. His heels knocked echoes from the board walk. He squeezed his left arm against the shoulder holster for reassurance. The wind made it hard to walk in a straight line. He looked at the *Carrie II* admiringly. It was a large cabin cruiser, about seventy-five feet long, painted white and brown. A blue and white flag with crossed swords snapped at the prow.

A man was seated in a deck chair watching him approach. Walter James halted ten feet away. "I'm looking for Major Rockwell."

"I'm Major Rockwell," the man said, and as he spoke he cocked the handaction rifle that lay in his lap. "Won't you come aboard, Mr. James?"

The slender man said, "You make it hard to refuse, Major." He stepped gingerly aboard the gently rocking ship

and dropped lightly to the deck.

Rockwell said, "Don't let the rifle frighten you, Mr. James. I've been shooting at birds." He was a big man, deeply tanned, with coarse gray hair. The backs of his hands and the portion of his chest visible from the open throat shirt were covered with heavily matted black hair.

"Rifles never frighten me, Major."

"You're a brave man then. I've seen plenty of them and believe me, Mr. James, they are a competent weapon."

Walter James tried unsuccessfully to light a cigarette. "The weapon is no better than the man who uses it."

"Here," said the major. "Let me." He held up a windproof lighter. Walter James bent his head over it, puffed furiously.

"Thanks," he said. "You need something like that around here."

"Yes, the wind comes up every evening about this time. You get so you like it after a while. I'd miss it now."

"Every man to his taste."

"Yes," said the major. "Every man to his taste. What's yours, Mr. James?"

Walter James grinned without mirth. "You didn't catch me off balance by knowing my name, Major. I've been in this business too long. I'm pretty damn sure you didn't ever see me before, but then I'm the kind of a guy who isn't hard to recognize. Even when the description is given over the phone."

Rockwell's eyes were bland. "You underestimate your fame, sir."

WALTER JAMES looked out across the water. "What's over there?"

"North Island—the navy air base. Coronado Island is on the other side of it. You can't see it from here."

"Who's the boat named for?"

There was a pause. The major said softly, "My wife. She's—dead."

"Do you think she'd like this busi-

ness?" Walter James asked him. "And I don't mean the yacht."

Rockwell's big hand brushed a speck of dust from the rifle barrel. "Subtlety is not your strong point, is it?"

"Sometimes, sometimes," said Walter James. "Everything in its time and in its place. Tonight I feel like shooting the works. You see, Major Rockwell, I'm looking for a man."

Rockwell lidded his eyes and didn't speak. Walter James stared at him for a moment.

"Maybe you can tell me something I want to know. Or maybe I can tell you something. Let's see who can surprise the other, shall we?"

The major smiled. "You're a pleasant talker, Mr. James. Why don't you just keep on?"

"I'll give you some advice. You should get rid of Boniface. He's too obvious to anybody with a suspicious mind. Like the police, for instance."

Rockwell seemed amused. "My only connection with Dr. Boniface is through our country club."

"In a pig's eye," said Walter James pleasantly. "He's the front man in your racket. He has that fancy office, all complete with Lienster machine to put the suckers into a nice hypnotic condition before he even gets to them. Boniface digs out their troubles and he probably gets some beauties. San Diego is a rich town, a lot of retired people here. There's bound to be a lot of neurosis mixed in."

"But, Mr. James," murmured the major, "isn't that a psychiatrist's business?" He seemed almost asleep in the chair, but his fingers caressed the stock of the rifle lovingly.

"Sure, the smaller man said. "Sure, it's his business. And business is pretty good. Because Dr. Boniface doesn't stop there. As soon as he gets the dirt, he passes it along to somebody who

decides if there are any possibilities, financially speaking."

"You have very interesting theories, Mr. James. I'd be interested in hearing who you think that mysterious somebody is."

Walter James pitched his cigarette overboard and watched the trail of sparks. The sun was entirely gone from the bay, but its traces were still visible on the Laguna mountains in the far distance.

"Don't be naive, major," he said. "I figure it would be somebody with nothing much to do, somebody with a lot of nerve who likes action. Maybe even somebody with a yacht."

There was a long silence. Rockwell stirred and stretched, his arms high above his head.

"Very pretty, Mr. James," he said lazily. "But I'm afraid that you're a better romancer than you are a thinker. That's all just speculation on your part. Where's your proof?"

"I'm not particularly interested in proof at the moment, Major."

ROCKWELL stood up. His head almost touched the canvas awning that shaded the deck. He held the rifle casually under one arm, its muzzle pointing at the deckboards.

"I'm afraid I don't understand you, sir. Just what are you interested in?"

Walter James smiled. "I thought I told you. I want some information."

"What kind of information?"

"I want to know what you know about Fernando Solez. That's all, Major. I'm not interested in your racket—I'm not one of the local law. As far as I'm concerned you can blackmail the mayor and feed dope to the city council. That's your business. My business is Fernando Solez."

"I'm sorry that I can't help you, Mr. James—"

The detective straightened his slim shoulders. His voice snarled. "You'll be damn sorry if you can't help me, Major. Let's take off the gloves. I've got to know anything you do about Solez. Tell me and we'll be as chummy as hell. Otherwise, Lieutenant Clapp might hear your name mentioned."

"Is that a threat, Mr. James?"

"Call it any name you like—but start talking."

Rockwell looked out across the darkening water. "I like you, Mr. James—you're a man after my own heart." He chuckled. "Of course, your story is ridiculous—"

"Skip it," said Walter James.

"But since you've gone to the trouble to look me up, I'll admit that I was acquainted with Solez, though only slightly. He was useful to me in a business connection on one or two occasions. The first I knew that he was dead was when I read it in the paper."

"Put it plainer than that, Major. I'm kinda dumb tonight."

Rockwell's eyes glinted at him. "You're a blunt man, Mr. James. That's an admirable quality, at times. Solez was able to procure certain chemicals that are useful to Dr. Boniface and myself in experiments that we're conducting."

The slender detective laughed noiselessly and without much mirth. "Our brown brother really got around. Where'd he get the stuff?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? It has to come from somewhere."

"Dr. Boniface handled all the arrangements," the major said smoothly. "I merely provided the financial—ah—backing. Neither of us were interested in the source."

"Keep talking."

The major gestured with his hands. "That's all there is to tell."

There was another moment of silence as Walter James picked over the story in his mind. "When was the last time you had any business dealings with Solez?" he asked finally.

"Let me see," the major said blandly. "It's hard to remember, Mr. James—it's been quite a long while."

Walter James said, "Take another look, Major. I'd say there was a deal on last Saturday night. The night the Filipino was stabbed."

Major Rockwell laughed deeply but without sound. "I swear, Mr. James, you're a wizard. There's no use trying to conceal a thing from you, really there isn't."

"Oh, I'm no mind reader, Major," Walter James deprecated. "There was a card found on Solez—at least, half a card. I found the other half later. Put them together and the trail was plain. Especially since it was one of the doctor's business cards."

THE major was silent. A chuckle rippled through the other man's slender frame. "Here's how I figure it, Major. For a long time I wondered why the card was torn in two. But it's really simple. Solez was a ticket taker and what does the ordinary ticket taker do with your ticket? Yep, he tears it in two. Am I boring you?"

The major sat down in the deck chair again. "Please continue, Mr. James."

"Every time you and Boniface wanted a delivery from Solez, Boniface wrote him a note on a small piece of paper and handed it to the Filipino along with a ticket. Solez tore it in two and stuck it in his coat pocket. He read it later. It's my hunch that he was just about to read it when he was killed. At least, that would account for why one piece was still in his coat."

He paused. Rockwell didn't move. "Maybe Boniface gave the note to Solez

at an early show—or maybe he was sitting in on the last one. A check of the audience would show. But it doesn't matter. He'd hardly give the Filipino a note with one hand and stab him with the other."

The shadowy figure in the chair moved its head slightly. "I don't see how all this particularly concerns me, Mr. James. I'm simply an innocent bystander."

Walter James stretched the length of his slim form. "Bystander, yes, Major. But innocent—well, now, I wonder." He groped around for the ladder to the dock.

The quiet in Rockwell's voice was underwritten with subtle menace. "You wonder what, Mr. James?"

Walter James watched the rifle lying across the sitting man's lap. "I wonder if you might be Doctor Boone." The rifle didn't move. Walter James put his foot on the bottom rung of the ladder.

"Why do you ask that?" The major's tones were unreadable.

Walter James shrugged. "Just an idle question. I'm like Durante. I got a million of 'em."

CHAPTER XIV

HE PICKED Kevin up at her house a little after seven. She was ready and waiting in a black cloth coat over a crepe dress that approached mustard yellow in color. Mr. Gilbert slouched in a low chair by the radio. He unfolded and shook hands when the girl let Walter James in; he appeared not to notice the little lights in his daughter's eyes. The two men appraised each other coldly. Walter James was wondering about the older man's connection with Shasta Lynn. He could sense Gilbert's wonderment about his own connection with his daughter. Suddenly,

Kevin seemed younger and younger.

The two men exchanged a few brief unimportant comments before Walter James followed the girl through the doorway. Gilbert's last words were: "Don't stay out too late, Laura. You've been doing it too much lately." His looming shadow against the front room lights seemed to pursue them to the car.

Kevin gave an exclamation of disgust. "Oh, gosh, Walter—there's Bob!" She gestured with her head at the yellow Model A coupe nuzzling the Buick's rear bumper.

"He's persistent, anyway."

"I think he's following me," the girl said angrily. "Wait a minute, Walter. We might as well get this over with right now." Her high heels made a belligerent tap-tap as she crossed the sidewalk to the yellow car. Walter James followed more leisurely.

"... your own business," Kevin was saying.

Newcomb's head was a dark silhouette against the car window. "It is my business—at least it was until this guy showed up."

Kevin's tones were so icily formal that Walter James grinned in spite of himself. "Well, it isn't any more. We're not married, you know. We're not even engaged. I can go where I want to and with anyone I want to."

"Sure you can, Laura," Newcomb agreed patiently, in the tone proper for reasoning with a small child. "But grow up a little bit, will you?"

Walter James expected for a moment that the girl would stamp her foot in exasperation. Instead, she merely drew herself a little straighter. "Please find somebody else to worry about." The light car rocked from the impact as she slammed the door. Walter James silently helped her into the Buick.

As they rolled forward, he looked at

her angry profile. "Relax."

She moved over on the seat and squeezed his arm. "I'm sorry, Walter—I never felt so much like an infant in my life!"

"I thought your poise was wonderful," he said gravely.

"Oh, did you?" she said and considered this for a moment. Then she looked at his face in the half-light. "Oh, you're laughing at me!" He confessed the crime. She sighed. "I don't mind—it's one way of making you pay attention to me." She gave an anticipatory shiver. "Tell me all about what happened today. Did you see Shasta Lynn? What's she like?"

"Let's just be a couple of people tonight. There's a pretty good murder mystery on at the Fox."

She wrinkled her forehead and peered at his profile. "You're teasing me, aren't you? Walter, I've got to know!"

He smiled forlornly. "Yes. I'm teasing you. I'm glad there isn't much to tell."

Kevin looked disappointed.

"And after that, can we be normal?" he asked.

"I suppose so," she said. "But I don't feel like being normal when I'm with you, Walter."

"I went out to La Mesa about eleven. Both the women were there—Shasta and this Madeline Harms. They had refilled a cigarette box in a hurry while I was coming in. I let them watch me collect the tobacco scraps in the bottom of the box and intimated that I was going to turn it in to the police lab. They weren't sure I was connected with the local cops or the government so they got a little excited. Particularly the Harms girl."

"What's she really like?" asked Kevin.

"She's not so much—a little on the impressionable side. She spilled most

of it. It was just the way we figured it. The Filipino was a go-between cutting a little out of each shipment to get in good with the big blonde."

"Had they kept marijuana cigarettes in the box?"

"Clapp ran a test on it this afternoon. I haven't seen him so I don't know how it turned out. But it's going to turn out yes."

"How about my father?" the girl asked in a low voice.

"No answer."

"There has to be an answer. I haven't thought about anything else all day."

WALTER JAMES said, "Look. I tried to edge into the subject of your father from every direction. Believe me, I was oblique as all hell. But no soap. They didn't pick up their cues. All these women did was make me positive that your father has no possible chance of getting involved because of this killing. As far as I could see, he didn't even enter Shasta Lynn's mind all the time I was there." I think I'd have been able to tell."

Kevin looked at him soberly. "Then you didn't get anywhere at all."

"I wouldn't say that. With Shasta Lynn thinking that the law is on her pretty tail, she's going to take a lot less interest in whatever might be going on between her and your father. And vice versa for your father."

She blinked and turned her head to one side. "Oh. I hadn't thought of that."

"Furthermore, think of this: we're way ahead of the cops on this thing. We're going to stay that way—know everything first and be able to take steps to keep your father out of this. Clapp hasn't a thing on Shasta Lynn but the weed angle and he can't possibly learn about your father through

that. First, because I couldn't and, second, because he doesn't dare push things half as far as I did this morning."

He had one hand lying along his trouser leg as he steered down Park Boulevard. She slipped her hand under it. "You're pretty clever," she said gratefully.

"It all follows. When your father learns that Shasta is a popular girl in the eyes of the law, he'll cool off in a hurry. I'll give you odds it's all over."

"It seems so quick. Last night—big problem. Tonight—nothing."

"What do you mean, tonight—nothing? We've got a date."

She giggled.

They were just another couple going into the Fox. Walter James thought: maybe we even look happier than most. He bought three loge seats at the box office. He left one ticket with the glass-caged girl, instructing her to present it to the first heavy-set man who tried to pay admission.

Kevin laughed at that. "You're sweet," she said. "I hope he hasn't seen the picture."

"Cops can't have everything," he told her.

THEY held hands for two hours. The picture was about a lovable old doctor who with small town shrewdness, geniality and homely philosophy brought a murderer to justice and two sweethearts to the point of matrimony. When the second feature came on, they tiptoed out.

"Not much like you, was he?" Kevin commented in the lobby.

"Not much," said Walter James. "I look like hell in a cracker barrel."

"Where to now?"

"Home. You've been staying out too late lately."

"Don't throw it up to me, Walter. I

couldn't possibly sleep tonight." She made her eyes pleading.

"You'll have every opportunity. I have to stand in good with your father. And don't pout at me, redhead—I'm wise to your tricks." She stuck out her tongue at him.

The lights in the front room were still burning when he braked the Buick at 45th Street and El Cajon.

"This is the earliest I've come in for months," Kevin pointed out. "Dad's still up."

"Fine," he said. "I like to make a good impression."

"I think you'd have the common decency to race me around the block. I'm just not tired," Kevin wheedled.

"Race at my age!" He laughed like the old doctor in the movie. "You forget, miss, I'm not as spry as I used to be."

"You're young, Walter," she said solemnly. "In a couple of ways, you're younger than I am."

He grinned. "Women always pull that one on their men."

She was sitting very erect, facing him. Her hands twisted nervously in her lap. The street-lighted portions of her face looked puzzled. In a small voice, she asked, "Are you my man, Walter?"

He said, "God, I hope so." She came to him. Their mouths were together but he wasn't conscious of her lips. He was conscious of her fingers clutching the back of his coat, of her knees clumsily bumping his, of the enveloping warmth of her, of the fresh smell that rose from her skin, but he wasn't conscious of her lips.

When they broke, she buried her cheek against his necktie. "Cigarette," she said shakily. He found the pack somehow and lit one for her. The smoke rose in nervous little puffs. He couldn't see her face.

Her voice was muffled. "Keep your hands on me, Walter. Please." He stroked the curve of her back. She was trembling. His fingers investigated under the coppery hair and discovered how two spearheads of soft down ran along the back muscles of her slender neck. His lips pressed the satiny top of her head.

She raised her face and sat up close to him. "It's never been like this," she whispered. "I guess I can't take it."

"I guess that's the way I feel. I don't know how I feel." He pulled her body against his and kissed her again. After a moment, she sighed and let her head lean against the back of the seat. They sat for a long time without saying anything, his fingers gently tracing designs on her face.

"You know what?" she murmured.

He kissed her eyelids. "What, redhead?"

"I've lost my cigarette."

He found it with his foot and ground it out.

She breathed out happily. "We could have burnt up and I'd never have found out about it."

"Tomorrow night?"

"You'll never be able to get rid of me now."

"I'll never try."

She kissed the back of his hand and held it against her cheek. "Walter. Please don't make me go in."

"I don't want to. But your father's still up and our friend's across the street and this isn't the place for us right now, anyway."

"We can go somewhere else."

He shook his head. She beamed and sighed. "This is a wonderful place!"

"Come on," he said.

HE HELPED her out of the Buick and she slipped her arm around him under his coat as they strolled up

the flagstones. Before they came into the half circle glow of the porch light, he stopped.

"Kevin, darling. Did you tell your father I was going to see Shasta Lynn today?"

She looked at him wonderingly. "Why, no! I haven't told him much of anything about you. Except how sweet you are."

"Well, just as insurance, just so he'll be sure to find out, tell him when you go in that I was out to see her this morning. Do it casually, as though I were helping the cops on this marijuana case. I think that will finish everything for once and for all."

"All right, Walter. And thanks for doing all this for me. You've been a terrific help."

"I'm a born helpmeet," he said.

"Kiss me again. Then I'll go in like a good little girl. Kiss me again to hold me over till tomorrow night."

They merged, a warm welcome in her body. Then they became two separate people again, whispering good night at the same instant. He watched her from outside the arc of porch light until the front door closed behind her.

Walter James gunned the car noisily away from the curb, drove down El Cajon two blocks, and pulled sharply right into a side street. He left the car there and paced swiftly down a block, over two, up another block.

The square whiteness of the house side facing 45th Street shone with street light. Carefully feeling his way along a row of bushes, he crossed in back of the house and circled the other side. This side was shadowed heavily. The window he wanted, the window nearest the telephone, was the first one from the front. He edged cautiously up to it and crouched by it at the foot of an oleander tree. The window was raised from the bottom about two inches. He

sat on the backs of his ankles and watched the glow of the front windows on the lawn.

Twenty minutes later the glow snapped off. A husky voice spoke behind him. "What're you up to now, James?" It was the heavy-set plain-clothesman.

"Come here," whispered Walter James. The detective squatted down beside him. "Not so damn much noise! How'd you like the show?"

"I asked what you were doing here," whispered the heavy man doggedly.

"Stick around and you'll find out. How'd you like the show?"

"Stunk. Why didn't you go to the Spreckels?"

"Thought you'd be interested in a murder mystery. Give you some pointers."

"We get along."

An orange-lit window at the rear of the house went black. "Probably the girl's room," murmured Walter James. "Oh."

THE two men crouched motionless until their legs began to prickle. The heavy man whispered worriedly. "It'd be just my luck to have somebody steal the car. I left the keys—"

A small lamp broke the gloom of the window above them. Gilbert's tall shadow appeared on the shade. It picked up the receiver. Walter James oozed his body closer to the window.

Gilbert dialed once for the operator. His voice was low as he placed his call. The heavy man jerked Walter James' coat. His lips spelt out, "I missed the number."

The slender man pointed to his ear and nodded reassuringly. Both men froze alertly against the side of the house as Gilbert began to speak. His voice, murmuring at first, became louder as he argued.

"... and I don't care. I can't get back to you over the radio, you know."

Silence as Gilbert listened.

"Don't ask me how I know. I just know. This end's too hot right now to put in a new man. Shut it off for a while, Steve. That's all. Shut it off."

He replaced the phone angrily. On the drawn shade, the two men could see the outline of his head peer around nervously as though he feared the receiver click had betrayed him. Then his shadow grew huge and the small lamp clicked out. They heard soft footfalls leaving the room.

Walter James drew away, letting his breath out. With light steps he strode to the front of the house and out to the sidewalk. The heavy man was right behind him.

"Okay. Now what did all that mean?"

"Clapp will know," said Walter James.

"Yeah, but I'm not Clapp. I'm not in on everything. I'm just watching the girl."

"Did you catch everything he said?"

"Most of it. As much as you did. Except the number. It was long distance, wasn't it?"

Walter James pulled a scrap of paper out of his wallet and scribbled on it. "Not so long. Here. Clapp will be interested in this, but don't get him out of bed to tell him about it."

The detective held the paper up and squinted at it. "It's a Tijuana number!"

"That's the answer. Have a good night's rest."

"But what was that 'shut it off, Steve, shut it off' talk?"

"Steve was playing his radio too loud."

"In Tijuana?" puzzled the heavy man, but Walter James had started off down the sidewalk.

CHAPTER XV

KEVIN waved to him madly from where she stood in front of the college's Moorish type administration building. As she scrambled into the Buick, she asked, "Where we going?"

"South of the border," said Walter James. He wore a lightweight powder blue suit and a Panama hat. "I took your tip about the weather and got this yesterday afternoon."

"You look good," she said critically. He spun the car around on the visitors' parking area and headed away from the school out College Way.

"At least I won't feel like I've been jerking weights all day. I think Clapp believes I have a guilty conscience because of the beads of perspiration on my forehead. He doesn't know it's my East Coast wraparounds."

"I don't know why I'm holding these in my lap!" Kevin said suddenly and tossed her books in the back seat. "But why are we going to Mexico? And why me along, Walter?"

"You ask more questions than I do, redhead," he observed.

"I know. But why?"

"I have to see a man in Tijuana. You have to get me there."

"Turn right on El Cajon and go down to Jackson Grammar School. Turn left there to National City. From there on we can't miss. Now why am I really along?"

"Maybe I just wanted to have you here." She tucked her feet under her and pushed across the seat until she was close enough to put her arms around his elbow. With one ear on his shoulder pad, Kevin exhaled a long and artificial sigh. "And then again, maybe I need you to drive back."

The girl looked up at him. "Are you going to stay down there?"

"I don't intend to settle. But talking

to your guardian angel last night, he told me about this big operator in Tijuana—a guy that knows pretty much about everything that goes on in both towns. I thought I'd drop in and see what he has to say." He paused a moment. "He may not care for me."

"Ooh!" she murmured and wiggled excitedly. "Walter, darling."

"What?"

"This is my first adventure."

Walter James laughed. "I was hoping you'd count last night."

She chuckled and squeezed his arm.

It was high noon when he rolled the Buick over the ramshackle bridge that led into the sweltering border town. Waves of heat hulaed up from the hard dirt streets. A few people sauntered along the porched sidewalks but only a few. Most of the souvenir shops were closed. One or two of the bigger nineteenth century firms, pregnable sheet glass fortresses, condescended to leave their doors propped open.

"It looks like Tuesday isn't the big day here," said Walter James. "Know where the Devil's Bar is?"

"I think I've been there. Turn at the Foreign Club. It's down that street, to the left. Oh, I hope you find out something, Walter!"

"It's about time," he said flatly. "Hal will start thinking I'm a washout as a partner."

Kevin patted his wrist. "I keep forgetting that your two best friends have been killed," she said softly. "I've never told you how sorry I am. I really am."

The slight detective pressed his lips together. "Ethel may not be completely lost—there's other answers. Amnesia. They may be holding her. She may be running away from them and not able to get in touch with me. She may have learned whatever Hal knew and is afraid to come out of hiding. She

doesn't have to be dead."

"There it is!" she pointed. "That blue and red sign!"

WALTER JAMES spurred the car past the tan adobe front of the target. He slowed down again as he drove round the block, scanning the other buildings. Three quarters around, he wheeled the Buick into a parking place by an alley.

"This must lead back of the place," he murmured. He unstrapped his shoulder holster, locking it and the .32 in the glove compartment.

"Mightn't there be trouble?" asked Kevin innocently. "Please don't let anything happen to you."

He smiled. "I think this is a spot where I'll be welcomed without it." He pushed a kiss against the end of her nose. "Kevin, tell me something. I'm going to mention Shasta Lynn in my interview here—just on the last mad chance she's got a finger in this. I'll need to know which nights your father was away from home. Then at least I'll know which nights she was clear."

Kevin clamped her teeth on her lower lip.

"There's nothing to worry about," he added as he saw her jumbled expression. "Your father's absolutely safe. It's just that I have to know everything. Trust me."

"I trust you, darling. It was Tuesday night last week. Wednesday night the week before that—and—and Friday before that. That's all the further back I go."

"Thanks, redhead. That'll be enough. I probably won't get a chance to even use it."

They crawled out of the car and walked arm in arm to the Devil's Bar. The cocktail lounge was circular, plainly edged with square dark booths. From behind the oval bar in the center of

the room, the two relaxed bartenders could keep an eye on the needs of every table. The cycloramic walls of the room were raw adobe muraled with an American artist's idea of a Mexican Hades. Virile devils roasted half stripped señoritas over strangely frozen flames. Other, more functional, devils wrestled with other, more fortunate, señoritas. There was one voluptuous female devil pursuing a wildly fleeing peon boy.

"You and me," Kevin giggled, as they took seats at the bar.

"I wonder if you have to be a Mexican citizen to die and go there?" Walter James murmured.

There were four other people at the bar. Two round-faced sailors and a young girl, whose fresh expressions contrasted the patterned leers of the mural, and a tired looking brunette behind a half empty Manhattan. The sailors and the girl were huddled in a low laughed conversation. The brunette contemplated puddles around her glass, stirring them idly with a crimson nail. Walter James noted that the painted devils had identical faces—the same tip-tilted brows, the same hair line mustaches, the same pointed chins. He was about to comment to Kevin when one swarthy bartender stirred and glided toward them.

"Two tequila stingers," he said instead.

"Are the pictures supposed to increase the body temperature so we'll buy more drinks?" Kevin whispered wickedly.

"Maybe the owner doesn't realize it, but he has the makings of a fine Chamber of Commerce here," he answered. The waiter was back already. "They must have this stuff ready-mixed."

Walter James laid the money on the counter and flattened his hand over it. "My name is Walter James. I want to

see Steve," he said.

The bartender regarded him steadily. "Big or little?"

"Big."

The swarthy man turned to his lounging partner. "Walter James. Senor Luz." The other bartender disappeared to the rear. The swarthy man took the bills and stood flapping them against the edge of the bar until the other man returned. They murmured together for a moment. Kevin sucked in her breath.

Walter James muttered in her ear, "In the car—twenty minutes," then the swarthy man said, "Come with me." He slid obediently off his stool and followed the man to a velour curtain at the rear. In the small corridor behind it, the bartender ran light fingers up and down his sides.

"Never use them," Walter James said. The bartender grunted and motioned him toward a door. He walked through it unattended.

IT WAS a long office of more raw adobe, hung here and there with small Spanish tapestries. Two men sat in straight-backed chairs along the wall—a beefy American and a dapper florid Mexican youth. Behind a carved desk at the other end of the room, an older man toyed with a salad in a wooden bowl. The older man rose.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Walter James. I have been expecting you."

Walter James advanced to the desk and put his forefingers on it. It seemed as though he had seen this man before. The mural in the bar. The man before him had the same features as all the identical devils: tip-tilted brows, hair line mustache, pointed chin. His complexion was satiny tan and he lacked horns; that was the only difference.

"You have the advantage," said Walter James.

"I am sorry," said Big Steve, inclin-

ing his head. "My name is Esteban Luz." Slender fingers gripped the proffered olive hand. "The young gentleman is Esteban Luz, my son. This is Mr. Darmer, my executive manager."

The men traded nods.

"Will you sit down, Mr. James? If you will excuse me, I will continue with my luncheon."

Walter James stayed on his feet. "I suppose Dr. Boone told you I was coming?"

"Hardly." Luz sucked in a strand of lettuce. "I had heard you had come to San Diego and were working with the police there."

"Shall we say involved instead of working?"

"Very well. Involved."

Darmer spoke weightily. "I'm sorry to hear that, James. It's safer to stay on the right side of the law."

"I've been trying," smiled Walter James.

"Did you think we could help you with your trouble?" asked the young Luz softly.

"My son means that in my years in Tijuana I have acquired a slight reputation as a local philanthropist. Many people come to me with their needs." Luz added white teeth to his satanic features. The slim man smiled back.

"I'm hardly a charity case," he said. "But the man in Atlanta recommended you highly. He said you were an excellent source."

"Atlanta?" Luz lifted an eyebrow. "I was not aware I had any friends in Atlanta."

"It was one of my friends. And Dr. Boone has passed through Atlanta a great many times."

"Dr. Boone," considered Luz. He pushed the salad bowl aside and placed the fork in it. "It has been quite some time since we have had the pleasure of Dr. Boone's company. How long was

it, John?"

Darmer said, "Quite some time."

"Yes. It must have been at least six weeks since he was last here. I hope nothing has happened to him. I doubt that anything could, however—he was such a large, healthy man."

"But so hurried to do business with," said Little Steve. "That was his one and only fault."

"Perhaps his mind was uneasy," suggested Walter James.

"Not from a disturbed conscience," smiled Luz.

"It will be hard on business for a while. The Filipino's dead."

"So I have heard. So many odd bits float across the border and my foolish mind insists on retaining some of the most unrelated. The Filipino is dead. However, he is not alone. There are many dead people, Mr. James."

"They've been stockpiling for years," Darmer added drily.

L UZ raised a hand. "And I should note here that I cannot see the connection between the Filipino and your visit."

"I thought perhaps I could help you," said Walter James courteously. "My own woes are many and my burden is heavy, but Allah be willing, I might furnish a new contact. A less fallible contact. The mail must go through, Luz."

"I still fail to see—" began the elder man.

Walter James picked up the telephone receiver. "Let me make a connection," he said flatly. He placed a call to XEGC and hummed as he waited. "Advertising, please," he asked and hummed some more. A voice crackled in the earpiece.

"This is Walter James of Southwest Advertising. I'm interested in finding which three days of the past three

weeks the Devil's Bar plugs have been run. It's an all-day run, I believe, on a specified day each week. No, that's all right. You may call me back anytime on Senor Luz' private phone. Thank you."

The receiver clicked down in a deep stillness. Young Esteban Luz rose slowly. Darmer stroked the cleft in his chin.

Luz' chest moved, the only indication that he was laughing. "Very interesting," he said. "And how much farther can you follow that connection?"

Walter James spread his fingers modestly. "No farther—yet. I haven't been in town a week."

"I don't think you should stay in town a full week, Mr. James. Let me point out a few solid facts. I see no reason for my cooperating with you—no possible advantage. Again, I am on my side of the border; the San Diego police are on theirs. It would require virtually an act of your Congress for them to take issue with me."

"I may take issue with you." The slender man's eyes began to fade. Luz held up one finger.

"That is my point. You are not in Atlanta where you should be."

"He's right," said Darmer. "This is Tijuana, this year. This is not Atlanta in 1942, '44 or '45."

Walter James turned. "I'm glad to see the Atlanta report has arrived." Luz revealed his teeth. "John is outspoken but that is our argument. We have knowledge of your brutality, Mr. James. Should it come to such an uncivilized result as open warfare—" He shook his devil's head sadly. "I am in my country surrounded by business associates. You are alone, unsupported. I am afraid the contrast in firepower would prove too much—even for a man with your record."

"You may be right."

"I have never been more positive. You may return to San Diego now."

"And pack your suitcase," added Darmer.

"There are two things you must not do, Mr. James. One is to pay another call on Lieutenant Clapp. Another is to visit a private residence in San Diego—your discretion will tell you which one. Now I must ask you to leave by the patio gate. I hope you will absorb today's lesson. *Un leccion de silencio.*"

SOMEHOW, the native phrase seemed odd on the elder man's tongue. Walter James nodded without speaking and moved toward the indicated door. He could sense Darmer and Little Steve coming up behind him. He opened the door and stepped into the vibrating heat of the patio.

A flash of reflected sunlight bit the corner of his eye and he twisted. The haft of the knife clipped the side of his neck instead of the back. He threw a fist into young Luz's soft belt line and the Mexican staggered against the doorjamb.

Walter James turned to run toward the gate in the high stucco wall, but Darmer's foot caught him in the small of the back. He fell, rolled over a stubby bush and staggered to his feet. His forearm stopped two of the beefy man's short jabs. The third blow got through — a long right that grazed metal knuckles across his cheek. The left side of his face went numb.

"Little different without a gun?" grunted Darmer. The Mexican was coming up again. He had left his knife in the doorway. Walter James ducked and pistoned both fists against Darmer's heart. The beefy American gasped. In the pause, the slight detective broke and whirled. The narrow edge of his hand sliced into Little

Steve's throat and the Mexican sank to his knees. He put both palms on the grass and began to vomit.

The metal knucks pounded mercilessly against his head. He drove a pointed toe into Darmer's kneecap, but he couldn't move his arms or his head fast enough to avoid the blunt metal rings. Walter James felt himself sinking; the sun had gotten inside his head somehow and was trying to burn its way out. Blood was bright on his powder blue lapels.

He lay down. It was the easiest way and the grass was cool. Darmer was wearing heavy, high-laced shoes. He could see one of them swinging back and forth methodically. There was no feeling except in the hot ends of his fingers and inside his skull. From the way his body was jumping, he realized he was being kicked. He remembered Clapp's objection to a finger in the kidneys and he wanted to laugh. How was it you laughed, now?

A voice murmured, "Enough, John." Then he was being dragged across grass and over neat rows of round stones and by low bushes. For a while it was pleasant being suspended in space, then there was beige dust all around him.

Walter James cushioned his face in the dust and stared at it. It was adobe-colored and alive with prancing red devils. He said aloud, "This is the alley."

After a long time he managed to balance himself on his elbows and his knees. The red devils resolved themselves into dark dusty globules of red. He spread his fingers among them and shoved up. The ground spun around and he nearly fell over. His side was beginning to ache now, in low rhythmic throbs.

He crawled and hoped it was in the right direction. He concentrated on moving his hands. From the hips down

there was no feeling. When he ducked his head, he could see his knees moving, so he knew he was crawling.

His dust covered hands reminded him of Kevin. Their hands were almost the same size. "Kevin" he called. That was useless—there were still twenty-five thousand one hundred and forty miles to go. That was the circumference of the earth.

HIS HEAD rammed something and he felt it. Adobe. Was everything adobe in this damn town? He put his shoulder against the rough surface and forced his body up.

It was pleasant up here without the dust. His nostrils began to clear. Looking back to see how far he had come, he saw the patio gate a yard away; he had crawled in a short semi-circle into the wall.

Walter James felt for a cigarette but the pack was empty. He said, "Hell!" and threw it down. Probably walking wouldn't be so bad now. He still couldn't feel his legs and that might make it easy.

It did. He stopped at the end of the alley and straightened his coat. It was impossible to brush much of the dark red mud off it. He drew in his breath and stepped into the street.

Kevin looked at him without recognition. Then she let out a short scream. "Walter!" She scrambled out of the Buick and ran toward him.

"It's your turn to drive," he said.

She was crying. "Walter, Walter!" she choked. "I'll kill them! I'll kill them!"

He held onto her shoulder with one dirty hand. "Later. Let's go back to town."

She helped him into the car and tried to wipe some of the caked blood off his face. "Don't," he said. "You'll just

(Continued on page 106)



By

**WILLIAM
LAWRENCE
HAMLING**

I SAT alone in the waiting room. Ronnie was inside with Dr. George Bretter, and I kept wondering what was taking so long. I didn't like doctor's offices—hospitals even less; but George was something more than just a doctor with a shingle on his door. He knew Ronnie—almost as well as I did. I knew her better because I had married her. Me, Cory Stone, the luckiest guy in Chicago.

There's Always Tomorrow

Just sitting there waiting. Over in the far corner of the room George's nurse kept eyeing me every once in awhile. I'm used to people and their eyes. I see a lot of them in my Howard Street nightspot, the *Crescent Theater-bar*, but there people don't look at you with sympathy, they're out for a good time, their eyes laugh. George's nurse wasn't laughing. She had the sober expression that would be in place at a morgue. That's one of the reasons I didn't like a doctor's office. I'd never been sick enough to need one either.

"Would you care to read a magazine, Mr. Stone?"

Her voice had sympathy in it. I managed a weak sort of smile at her and shook my head no. I wished she would go back to her cards and records and let me alone.

"It shouldn't be much longer, Mr. Stone. I'm sure there's nothing to worry about."

"Do I look like I'm worrying?"

"I'm sorry."

She looked away from me. I had snapped her off pretty crudely and I guess she hadn't deserved it. But she left me alone to think, and I wanted to think.

Worried? Was I worried? Do you worry when the person you love is sit-

Cory Stone thought he had found happiness that day when **Ronnie** walked into his office. But fate had something else in store for him . . .



I found her in the living room, huddled in front of the phonograph. Her whole body was shaking and there was a haunted look on her face

ting in a doctor's office not knowing exactly what is wrong—and you're sure nothing is, and yet, you *know*?

I think in screwy ways. My words don't make sense to me sometimes. Like now. With my wife in there. The healthiest girl you ever set eyes on, and you wouldn't even think of health when you looked at her. I remember when I first had seen her three years before. She came to me for a job. She wanted to sing. The headwaiter brought her back to my office. That was more than unusual in itself. I got a lot of stage-struck dames every day in the week clamoring for a chance. But they were all just dames. And my boys all had orders to steer them away—the same way they came.

I remember giving Jack a dirty look when he brought her in.

"Mr. Stone, this young lady is looking for a job."

Just like that. But there was something on his face that kept me from jumping down his throat. I saw what had caused it when he stepped aside and she walked up to my desk.

She didn't exactly walk. Angels don't walk, they float. That was the first time I'd ever seen an angel. I never knew they existed.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Stone, but I didn't know of any other way to make an appointment."

She was sorry to bother me. She said that, and I knew she meant it. I heard the words—I can remember every word she ever uttered when I was around to hear them. You don't forget music like that. I even remember my own words at that time. They were trite and fumbling.

"What's your name?"

SHE said her name was Ronnie. Ronnie Carroll. But I could have found some better names. They were written

all over her. In her hair where sunbeams had nestled in a flow of gold—in her eyes where a piece of the sky had locked itself away—on her lips and cheeks where heaven smiled down—and the rest of her. I could have written a poem just like those words sound. But I would have had to tear it up and start all over again. Poems like that are never written.

I remember telling Jack that was all. I didn't see him leave. Suddenly we were alone. Ronnie and I. I asked her what she wanted to do. She said:

"I think I can sing. I'd like a chance."

I didn't care if she never sang a note in her life. I didn't care if she kept a couple of toads in her throat for vocal chords. I didn't see how it mattered.

"Would you be able to arrange an audition for me, Mr. Stone?"

I've never liked my last name. A stone is something hard and cold. Something you toss around or use to build streets so people can walk over them. The way she said it I liked it. It sounded light and warm, like a little pebble resting on a beach on a summer day.

She sang for me. She used the piano in my office and I wanted to build a wall around it so nobody could ever touch it again. After she finished she turned and looked at me.

"I'm not very good. But I think I can learn."

She meant that too. With anybody else it could have been an act, or the truth. I'd seen enough to know it wasn't an act with Ronnie, and that it wasn't the truth. She didn't have to learn. She had what nobody could get by being taught. She had a voice and she didn't need it. People would pay to just look at her.

They did.

I expanded the *Crescent* twice its

original size. Even then I had to put ropes on the doors. The whole show was Ronnie, and Ronnie was everything. When she came on the whole place hushed and even the waiters stopped serving. I sat at my private table every night with George Bretter holding down another chair. Until Ronnie started working for me I could never get George to come. I guess I could say as much for most of Chicago.

That went on for over two years. That and the times Ronnie and I would slip away for a quiet evening of our own. Sometimes we would dance. Most of the time we would go to my apartment and sit and listen to Dvorak's *Fifth Symphony*. Ronnie would rest her head against my shoulder and lay still and quiet through the *Largo*, Going Home, and I would try to force my lungs to breathe with the music and the sound of her own breathing.

Not quite a year later I married her. I still can't believe it actually happened. She could have had anybody. Even George, and they don't come any better than George. I guess I know why she picked me. If it had been George or any of the others they would have wanted her entirely for themselves. They would have locked her away and sat outside the bars admiring her.

I'm not like that. I guess Ronnie knew it. She loved people, she wanted to be with them. My business is people and she knew I wouldn't try and shut her away. Maybe I made a mistake in not doing it.

IT ALL started with a little headache. A month had gone by since our wedding. There's no use in trying to describe that month. I started to live from the moment she said: "I do." I took her up to Northern Wisconsin to

a little lodge I own on the Willow Flowage. We stayed there for a week. Then we came back and the *Crescent* started breaking attendance records again. The only difference this time was that I took her up to my apartment every night after closing and we'd lean back on the couch with the *Largo* soothing the room and afterwards I wouldn't have to take her home. She was there.

Then one night she got this headache. It came on right after the midnight show and, as usual, George was at my table. I wanted to get her a couple of aspirins but George shook his head.

"I don't think it's going to be that simple, Cory."

I asked him why not and all the time Ronnie sat beside me trying to smile.

"I've been watching Ronnie for some time, Cory. I've been waiting for something like this to happen."

Ronnie laughed at him. "Don't be silly, George. It's just a headache. Don't sound so serious!"

"I'm afraid I'll have to be serious, Ronnie."

A look of puzzled concern crossed Ronnie's face, and knowing George as I do, I could tell that he wasn't joking.

I asked him: "What are you trying to say, George?"

"I'm trying to say that I've seen this coming on for a year. It's Ronnie's nerves. She's been working too hard."

Ronnie laughed again and turned to me, lowering her forehead close to my face. "Kiss me, Cory—just a little one."

I kissed her forehead and she straightened with another laugh. "There. You see, George, it's all gone!"

George just sat there looking at her. He didn't smile. I had never seen him act like this.

"You can't laugh it off that easily, Ronnie. After all, I am a doctor—be-

sides being one of your close friends. I'd like to have you come up to my office tomorrow."

This time Ronnie didn't laugh. She looked at me and I was very far from laughing. "Cory he really means it. But really, I feel all right."

I looked over at George. "What's the pitch, George? You say you've been watching Ronnie for some time—for this?"

He was lighting a cigarette. "Maybe I better put it this way, Cory. I think Ronnie should see a doctor. I know you don't think much of hospitals or doctors. Maybe it would be better if you took her to someone else."

I knew then he wasn't kidding. Otherwise he would never have suggested that I take her some place else. I wouldn't have anyway.

"Nobody could touch Ronnie or me but you," I told him. "I'll see that she comes to your office."

THAT was the beginning. She went to George's office and he prescribed a rest and some little white pills which he gave her.

I took her away for a month back to the lodge. She followed George's advice and took one of the pills every day. But it didn't help. She started getting the headaches more often and then she couldn't sleep. I'd wake up in the middle of the night to find her tossing restlessly. One night I woke up to find her crying softly into her pillow. I put an arm around her.

"What's the matter, honey?"

She stopped crying, and when she spoke her voice sounded strained.

"I can't sleep, Cory. My head keeps buzzing. I—I feel as though I want to run and run until it goes away!"

I pulled her close against me and felt her trembling. "Maybe you better take a pill, honey. Maybe you'll feel better."

She sobbed against me. "I took one this evening. It doesn't help. Cory, take me home, please take me home!"

"Sure, Ronnie, sure I'll take you home," I whispered in her ear. "But George said you needed a rest, and I really think he's right. I've had you working too damned much. I should have known better."

I could feel her shake her head. "No, Cory. I'm sure that isn't it. I want to work! I want to sing—I'll be better once we get back. Please, Cory . . ."

I took her home. For the first time I didn't want her to sing. She was really sick, even I could see that. And when she went on in the show there was a difference. It wasn't in the way she looked or the way she danced in slow graceful movements over the floor. She was still the angel that everyone came to see. But when she sang, I could tell the difference. Maybe the customers couldn't—yet. But I could. She sang too loud and too fast. Like she wanted to drown out something or run away from it.

The sleepless nights kept coming closer together until she was afraid even to turn out the lights. By this time George was seeing her every week. I tried to drag something out of him but couldn't. He kept up the pills and started to use something he called psychology.

Nothing helped. I even persuaded her to drop shows every other night so she could get more rest. She wouldn't quit all together. This was no soap just like the rest. She began to slip faster. I could tell it in her eyes. The piece of sky that she kept tucked away in them was beginning to cloud. There were dark circles under them that even powder couldn't hide.

SO THERE I was, sitting in George's outer office again. I got a cigarette

out and lit it and heard the smoke whistle through my nostrils. That's how quiet the room was. I couldn't even hear the nurse's pen scratching on her record sheets. Maybe she had a pen that didn't scratch.

A couple of years went by while that cigarette burned down. I wanted to get up and rush into the other room and grab Ronnie into my arms and rush out again. I wanted to take her someplace where there was peace and quiet so she could sleep again.

Then the door opened.

Ronnie came out. It was as though I hadn't seen her for years, and yet only a half hour had gone by. There she stood, smiling at me.

"I'm sorry you had to wait so long, Cory."

Yes, she was smiling, and even her voice had a little laugh in it. But it wasn't the kind of gaiety that you laugh along with. It was forced. I could tell by the little lines that were pulled around her lips, lines in a face that wanted to tremble. And her eyes were tired.

"Don't be silly, Ronnie," I told her. "It's just been a few minutes. How was everything?"

She came over to me. Behind her I could see George coming out of the consultation room.

"George says I'll be fine—in a little while."

This time there wasn't any laughter in her voice. Only strain and hope. I got up as George approached.

"Cory, I'd like to see you in my office for a moment."

Ronnie turned toward him in a light movement that made her feet seem not to move at all. Every time she did it I could see her just as plain as the first time she walked into my office, floating, not walking.

"I hope you haven't any dark secrets,

George," she said.

His face was sober as he tried to sally off what he knew I saw there. "Just a big dark fee, Ronnie."

I reached out and squeezed her fingers. They were cold. "Now it's my turn. Be back in a minute, honey."

I followed George into his office. He closed the door.

"Sit down, Cory."

I picked out a nice big leather chair in front of his desk. It was comfortable but I wasn't. Along the far wall stood a row of cabinets filled with bottles and boxes. The air was filled with a smell I didn't like. The smell of antiseptics that probably came from some of the bottles. On the other side of the room was a long sheet-covered table with elbow joints on both ends. There were creases in the sheet where someone had lain. Ronnie had just been in here. . . .

"What's on your mind, George?" I asked him.

HE WAS sitting behind his desk now. He still had on that long white coat that doctors look important in. He was looking at me with a troubled frown.

"Cory, I'm afraid it's serious. That's why I asked you to come in alone."

I could feel my heart pounding. "I guessed that much. How serious? Does she need an operation?"

He shook his head. "Cory, I hate to say what I'm going to have to. No, Ronnie doesn't need an operation. As a matter of fact, there is nothing organically the matter with her."

I straightened in my chair. "You're not trying to tell me that Ronnie is a mental case . . ."

He got up and walked around the desk until he was looking down at me. "If you mean that I think Ronnie is insane, no. She is as sane as you or I.

But I am going to say that she does have a mental condition . . . a neurosis. Call it a fixation if you wish, I personally don't know what to call it—and in this respect the rest of medical science is at a loss too.

"But one thing I am certain of. Ronnie has developed a psychosis that is affecting her entire physical well-being. She has never had anything seriously wrong with her before and when finally overwork produced a nervous strain that started with those headaches, it upset her nervous balance, and everything I have tried to do since then has failed.

"She firmly believes that she cannot sleep. She is equally certain that sleep is all she needs. This psychosis has lodged in her subconscious mind and has created a barrier which she can no longer overcome. All those head noises that she complains of at night are a result of her subconscious mind influencing a conscious stream of thought. She wants to sleep to gain rest. She knows she must have rest. But her fear of not being able to has grown into a physical thing. Not even the sedatives I've been giving her help."

He stopped talking then and leaned back against the edge of his desk looking at me and waiting for me to say something.

I could feel little beads of sweat tingling on my forehead. All I could think of was Ronnie waiting outside. Ronnie, who had always been so full of laughter, Ronnie, whom the people came to see because they wanted her or had someone like her. Ronnie who had never been sick until after I married her.

"What do you think I should do, George?"

He waited a long moment. Then: "What I've just told you, Cory, is my own personal diagnosis. I would like

to suggest that you take her some place else first. . . ."

This was the second time he had said that. He knew I didn't like doctors. He knew I wouldn't trust anyone else with Ronnie's health.

"What could anyone else do that you can't?" I asked him.

"Very little, Cory. That much I am positive of."

"Then why even suggest it?"

"Because it might rule out any doubts you may have."

"What kind of doubts?"

He shrugged. "I mean that there is always a possibility that I am wrong."

"Do you think you are wrong," George?"

He shook his head slowly. "I know I'm not wrong, Cory. For Ronnie's—and your—sake I can't afford to be."

I thought a minute. I could see that he was waiting for me to say something further. And I knew what it was.

"George, you said before I should take her someplace else first. Did you mean that there is something you can do?"

"One thing," he said.

I got up from my chair. "Then what the hell are you waiting for?"

"What I'm thinking of, Cory, I don't want to do."

VERY slowly I was getting mad. You get that way when you've been hounded day and night for months by something you can't understand, by something that had never happened before, while you watch someone who means more than life to you slowly drift away, and you don't know why.

"Quit beating around the bush," I told him. "If you've got something that will help Ronnie I want to know what it is."

He let out what amounted to a sigh.

"All right, Cory, what I meant was an insulin shock treatment."

Maybe I was supposed to faint dead away just because he mentioned it.

"Why don't you give it to her?" I asked.

He went around and sat down once more. He picked up a pencil and started tapping it on the glass desk top as he looked at me.

"You don't understand the seriousness of such treatment. Usually we give it only to patients beyond medical help of any sort. It's a drastic step."

"What kind of patients—mental?"

"Usually."

"You said Ronnie was one."

"The kind of mental patients I'm speaking of are those we classify as insane."

"That's not Ronnie."

"I know that."

"But you still say there is nothing else you can do."

"Nothing I know of."

"Would it cure her?"

"If it didn't do anything else."

I began to see what he meant, what he was afraid of. I took a handkerchief out of my pocket and wiped my face. The handkerchief was already wet.

"What if Ronnie decides to try it?" I said.

He tapped the pencil harder. "I still wouldn't want to do it."

"What if I told you you had to do it?"

He got up slowly and his eyes were hard and grim. "You couldn't force me to do it, Cory. It would have to be my decision."

"Then there's nothing else to say."

I turned around and started to walk out. He came up behind me and his fingers tightened on my shoulder. "Listen, Cory, there's still a chance that she may snap out of it. I've given her

some more sedatives and tried to use my influence on her mind. Let's give it a chance.

I hesitated a little with my fingers on the door knob. "Okay. We'll give it a chance. But I'm not going to let her get any worse."

He squeezed my shoulder and stepped away. I walked out the door.

I DROVE down to Lincoln Park because it was quiet there and a lot closer to nature. Ronnie and I walked along the concrete walks past the animal cages and watched the kids throw peanuts to the bears.

All the way down she had sat quietly beside me. Every once in awhile I shot a quick glance at her and each time I caught a tremor on her lips and a creasing frown on her forehead that had never been anything but smooth before. I had a rough idea of what was bothering her just then. I couldn't bring it up myself.

We made our way up to the Conservatory and the place was alive with tulips. Suddenly her fingers tightened in mine.

"Cory . . . What did George really want with you in there?"

I kept on admiring the tulips. "He just wanted to tell me how you're getting along."

"Cory, you wouldn't lie to me, would you?"

When I looked at her it nearly tore my heart out. She just stood beside me, her lips dry and parched so that the lipstick was cracking on them, a tense gauntness starting to shadow her cheeks, and her eyes were crying out at me.

"Ronnie, I wouldn't lie to you."

"Cory. I'm not really sick, am I?"

She didn't want to say it and I didn't know of any way to get around it. "Honey, the way you've been acting

these past months you really must be sick."

"But—" she broke it off like a person dropping a china dish. "I'm not sick like—other people!"

What could I say except: "You've got to help yourself, Ronnie. That's what George told me. He gave you some more pills, but he said the rest is up to you. You've just got to decide that nothing is wrong and that you can sleep if you really try."

It was the easiest way I could tell her. She knew what I meant and even then it brought wetness to her eyes.

"Cory, maybe you better send me away, or maybe I better go, or—"

Right out in the park, in the middle of the tulips, I took her in my arms and crushed her against me. I wanted to scream as she sobbed into my shoulder. I wanted to find the thing that had done this to her and take it and tear it to pieces and then do it all over again.

After a while she pushed away from me and started wiping her eyes. "I—I'm sorry, Cory. I won't do it again."

I took her arm. "Let's go home, honey. We don't have to go to the club tonight."

"No, Cory. If I do that it will be admitting defeat. I'm going to fight hard, I'm going to beat it—but you've got to help me."

I'd have torn off my right arm if it would have done any good. "I'll help you, Ronnie. Anything."

"Then let's pretend nothing has happened at all. I want it that way."

We walked out of the park with the sun at our backs and it seemed like a shadow was following us. With every step it seemed to get closer.

THE *Crescent* was doing a land office business, as usual. All the tables were filled and there was an overflow

crowd muscling shoulders at the bar. The floor show was going on for the midnight turnover and the lights had just dimmed for Ronnie's number.

I was standing at the end of the bar where I could get a good look at the stage without being too far away from my private bottle. There was a guy standing next to me that I had noticed before, only I had never given him more than a second glance. He was a big man with shoulders like battering rams that made you think of heavy doors lying in pieces after he finished going through them. He wore a dark blue serge suit that I remembered seeing him wear before. He had an Irish face and a crop of red hair that stuck out from under a blue fedora. That part was all right as long as he stayed at the bar. He was drinking boiler makers, and if he wasn't an Irishman, he should have been.

Ronnie came on.

All the lights dimmed until there was only the soft blue spot that followed her around the floor. She had on a strapless red taffeta gown with some lacy frills along the shoulder line. A lot of women can't wear them without taking deep breaths, but Ronnie could. She was holding a handkerchief that I knew was pink but looked sort of a dusty orchid under the spot. She had her hands clasped in front of her as she came on.

"What's the matter with Ronnie?"

Out of the soft whisper of the music and the silence of the customers I heard these words. They sounded like bombshells in my ears and I thought somebody had shouted them until I turned my head and saw the guy next to me had spoken.

I ignored him and turned my head back to the stage. She was walking slowly around it and an overhead mike was following her as she started to sing.

"Your name's Stone, isn't it?" said the guy.

I wanted to slug him one but he was too big. So I turned and tried to shut him up. "That's my name, but I don't know yours. Besides, wait until she's through."

"She's through right now, Stone. That's what is important. My name isn't. I'm just one of the people who come here to look at her. What have you done to her? Look at her—she's through!"

I could have said a lot of things. I could have had him thrown out. I could have walked away. I didn't do any of them because I knew he was right. He saw it too. Maybe they *all* saw it. . . .

Yes, she was through. I could tell it in her voice. The way the words strained themselves coming out. The way she missed a beat and broke a little on a high note. The way she walked. Walked. Yes, that was it—she *was* walking. Ronnie didn't walk. Ronnie had never walked. Ronnie floated. That's why people just wanted to sit and look at her. She had floated like an angel under a soft blue spot. She had floated with a blue heaven haloed around her. But not now. She wasn't floating anymore. She was walking. Just like a thousand other singers on night club floors would do. She was one of the mob. She—

The lights came back on and there was a smattering of applause. But mostly there was a lot of buzzing conversation. I couldn't hear the words but I didn't have to. I could guess what was being said.

"You see, Stone, everybody knows it. What have you done to her? Ever since you married her she's been hitting the skids."

He was looking at me with the same angry expression. I knew he was a

customer and should have been treated like one, but what he had said was still cutting into me like a razor.

"Why the hell don't you mind your own business?"

He didn't get mad, or maybe he was mad already. "She *is* my business, Stone. She's the business of everyone who comes in here to see her. I don't like what you've done to her."

There was a dull ache pounding in my belly and choking up into my throat. I wanted to get up on the stage and tell everyone what was the matter. But I couldn't because I really didn't know the answer myself.

I walked away from the big guy, but I could feel his eyes following me.

I TOOK her fur wrap and laid it across a chair in the living room. It was only a little after one and back at the *Crescent* the last show wouldn't come on until two. But Ronnie was in no shape for it.

I moved over beside her on the couch and tried to smile. "Just take it easy, honey. I'll fix a couple of drinks."

She shook her head and even the indirect lighting couldn't hide the pallor that was spreading over her cheeks. Even the powder she wore didn't help. "No, thank you, Cory. But have one yourself."

I laughed: "I never drink alone, Ronnie. You ought to know that."

She didn't smile back. She sank into the cushions and looked at the rug.

"Cory . . ."

"Yes, honey."

"Cory, I'm not going back to the *Crescent*."

I didn't laugh this time. There was something in her voice that wouldn't let me laugh.

"Why not, Ronnie? You said yourself that you wanted to work. And besides, the customers won't like it." I

didn't know why I was saying those things. All along I had tried to get her to quit working, to take it easy, hoping that a rest would do her good. Now I was arguing just the opposite. Maybe it was because she said she wasn't going back. Or maybe it was the way she said it.

"It's no use, Cory, I can see that now. And you're wrong about the customers, I was watching them tonight. They know, Cory. It's easy to see. They know. . . ."

"Know what, Ronnie? You're letting your imagination tell you these things. The customers love you—so do I."

She reached out and took my hand. There was a soft glow in her eyes that I hadn't seen there for a long time.

"Thank you, Cory, that was very sweet. But it's no good. I know that now. When you tried to tell me this afternoon in the park—I knew what you meant, but I thought I could fight it out myself. Now it's even affecting my work. You know it's true, don't you, Cory? Please don't lie to me."

I swallowed my heart and nodded. "Yes, honey, I know it's true. But you've got to lick this thing. And you *can* lick it."

"If only I could sleep and shut it out of my mind. . . ."

"You can sleep, Ronnie. George says you can. That's why he's giving you medicine to help. You're very tired; let me help you to bed."

She took her hand away and leaned back against the couch. "Not right now, Cory. I want to think this out by myself. I have to. You go to bed—please."

I got up from the couch and stood looking down at her for a long time. Then finally I bent down and kissed her. "Sure, Ronnie, but don't stay up too late."

I left her there.

THE music woke me up. It's funny to be awakened by music. You lay there for a while thinking you're still asleep and if you hear only the music maybe you can go back to sleep again.

But I heard something else. The alarm clock ticking on a table beside the bed. I knew I was awake.

The music got clearer now that I knew I was actually hearing it, and I sat straight up in bed as I recognized it. It was the *Largo*, Going Home, from Dvorak's Fifth Symphony. It was Ronnie's music and mine.

I looked over at the clock. Five minutes to five. I looked over on the other side of the bed. Ronnie wasn't there. Then I heard something else.

It was a soft sound, like something lost, crying in the darkness. It was Ronnie's voice.

I found her in the living room, huddled in front of the victrola with her head cradled on her arms in front of the speaker. Her whole body was shaking and I could see where the tears had run down her arms and stained the red evening gown she still wore. I got on my knees beside her.

"Ronnie, Ronnie, honey, what's the matter?"

She shivered even more as I touched her and pulled away. She crouched beside the victrola and her eyes were wide and brimming and staring. She reminded me of a little dog I had seen behind the Crescent a long time ago, a little dog that had been knocked off its feet by a beer truck and had huddled against the building, beaten, shocked, and afraid even of its self. This couldn't be Ronnie, staring up at me. This was somebody else.

"Don't touch me, Cory, please don't touch me—I can't stand it!"

Something cold walked down my back. This was it. I knew it. This was it. She was beaten, her mind had

accepted it. She was a bundle of nerves and shock in a red taffeta evening gown that was stained with tears.

I got her on her feet and shook her. It hurt in a way that words can't say, but I shook her. I shook her so hard she grew limp in my arms. Then I picked her up and carried her to the couch.

I knelt on the floor beside her and wiped her forehead with a handkerchief from my dressing own. She was still and limp in a dead faint.

I got to my feet and went over to the liquor cabinet. My fingers shook so when I poured out a shot of whiskey that I spilled a lot on the walnut finish. And all the time the victrola kept playing the *Largo*.

I gave her the whiskey a little bit at a time. Finally she opened her eyes. They were little wet stones with waves breaking over them, but she didn't cry anymore. I don't think she had the strength to.

"Cory . . ."

"Yes, Ronnie. I'm sorry if I hurt you, but—"

"It's all right, Cory. Cory . . ."

"What is it, honey?"

"You've got to leave me, Cory. It's all over . . . But I tried to fight it, I tried so hard—I even put on our music . . . It didn't help. Nothing can help me—any more. . . ."

I buried my head in her dress because I felt something wet running down from my eyes. I could hear her heart beating in staccato thumps and I felt her short rapid breaths. Nothing can help me—*nothing can help me!*

THEN I remembered. It was what George had said. Something about a shock treatment with insulin. Something that would snap her out of whatever it was that was causing this. But George had said he wouldn't do it. He

didn't want to take the risk. He had said not even if I forced him.

"Ronnie." I lifted my face and looked at her. She looked so tired, so weary. "Ronnie, maybe there is something that can help you."

She turned her gaze away from me. "There is nothing. George said—"

"George told me there is a way. He told me he could cure you if he tried a special treatment!"

She was looking at me again. There was the faintest flicker of hope in her eyes.

"What is it, Cory? What did George say?"

I knew I was sweating because my pajamas were sticking to me. "Ronnie, do you trust me—and George?"

She tried to squeeze my hand but couldn't. "I trust you, Cory. And George too."

"Then listen, honey, we're going over to George's office right now. I'll call him and tell him we're coming. George will give you this treatment and then you'll get well. You'll get well, honey, do you hear?"

She didn't say anything, just gave a little nod and tried to still the quivering around her lips. I got to my feet.

George was asleep, but I hung on the line until I got him. I told him we were coming down to his office. He wanted to know why and I told him Ronnie was worse. He didn't want me to come but I told him to get down there fast. Then I hung up.

I went to my room and dressed. When I put on my suit coat I opened my dresser drawer and took out a .38 revolver. I slipped it into my pocket and went to get Ronnie.

THE light was on in his office, so I knew he had gotten there ahead of us. He was waiting by the nurse's desk, tying his long white smock into place.

I shut the hall door.

"I got here as fast as I could," he said. Then he came over and took Ronnie's arm. "You better sit down, Ronnie. You look all in."

That was the biggest understatement of all time. But I knew he was trying to be kind so I didn't say anything. He led Ronnie over to one of the leather divans, sat down beside her, and started checking her pulse. I waited.

Finally he shook his head and turned to me. "I think we ought to put Ronnie in a hospital. She's a very sick girl, Cory."

I managed to keep myself calm although my nerves were jumping as hard as a filly at a steeplechase. "That's why I brought her here, George, because she is a sick girl. But you're wrong about the hospital. I don't think we need it."

He got up slowly. "It would be the best thing."

"Let's go in your private office, George."

He shrugged and turned to the door. I went over and took Ronnie by the arm. We all went inside. I put the door at my back and my right hand in my coat pocket.

"What about that insulin treatment, George? Do you have the stuff here?"

I could see him frowning but he turned his head away fast. "Why, yes . . . But there's no point in—"

"Ronnie wants it. I want her to have it. You said it was the only way. Give it to her."

His face got a little red and he tried to be indignant. "Listen, Cory, you can't tell me what treatments to give a patient. I'll admit I did say it was the only way—but I also said it was dangerous!"

"Give it to her."

"I don't think I better."

I pulled the gun out of my pocket.

Ronnie let out a little cry.

"Cory! Put that gun away! George will listen—"

"I'm not fooling, George. You said you wouldn't give it to her even if I forced you. Well, I'm forcing you, and I'm not kidding. I've put Ronnie's whole life in your hands. Up to now you haven't done a damn thing. Now you're going to."

He stood looking at me for a long moment. I kept the gun pointed at him and I was glad it didn't shake in my hand. He had a funny look in his eyes that I had never see before. It might have been pity.

"I rather thought you'd act like this, Cory. You're the emotional type. Very well, you leave me no alternative."

HE STARTED puttering around with a wall cabinet and I shot a quick glance at Ronnie. She had collapsed into a chair and was sitting with her hands limp on the chair arms. She was looking at me. I saw shocked surprise in her eyes, and also something else. When you live with a woman you get to know her. The way Ronnie was looking at me now I knew she was glad. She was afraid—I could see that too—but she was glad. She trusted me.

George put a metal tray on the desk and slipped on a pair of rubber gloves. There were two large bottles on the tray. Both were filled with colorless liquids. There were labels on the bottles, but the print was very small and I couldn't read it.

"What's in the bottles, George?"

He was picking up a long hypodermic syringe. "One bottle contains distilled water, the other insulin. Cory, I'm doing this only because you're forcing me to."

"I'm forcing you because you told me that you could cure Ronnie. If you've got any other sure remedy, say

it now."

He kept staring at me and maybe he was trying to think of some way to get the gun out of my hand. Finally he shook his head.

"There's no other way I can think of that would be just as good a cure. . . ."

"Then go ahead."

He looked at the gun in my hand and I knew it still wasn't shaking. Over in the chair I heard Ronnie start to cry.

"Cory, I want to get well again. . . ."

"Don't worry, honey, George knows what he's doing. You'll get well." Then I shot my eyes back at George. He was still holding the hypo. "All right, George, she's in your hands."

I watched him as he opened one of the bottles. I saw him stick the needle in and pull back on the plunger. I could see the hypo filling, and it was a big one. Then he capped the bottle and picked up a piece of cotton. He stuck it in another bottle and then swathed a good portion of her arm close to the shoulder. He didn't even have to move the evening dress down any. I could smell alcohol.

It seemed like a year passed by while that hypo touched her skin. I could feel sweat breaking out all over me and there were little black spots buzzing in front of my eyes. But I kept the gun on him.

He shoved the plunger in all the way. He held it there for a minute, and then pulled the needle out. He stepped back.

"What happens now?" I asked him, and my voice sounded strange even to me.

"All we can do is wait," he said.

It didn't take long.

Suddenly Ronnie stiffened in her chair. Then she started to shake. It wasn't the kind of shakes I'd seen before. This was something else. Something that George had called a shock treatment. Then she started to sweat.

It stood out on her forehead like big drops of dew, but it didn't roll down. A shudder slipped from her lips and then a low moaning sob.

I looked at George. "Is this supposed to happen? Is she all right?"

His face was sober and his eyes were cold. "You forced me to do it. She's in a state of shock."

That told me a lot. I was supposed to know everything now. I could write a goddammed book on the subject. She was in a state of shock . . .

She changed again. The shivering passed. The sweat was still there, but now she was gasping. She labored for breath and I could see her trying to move her arms and jaws, but she couldn't. Then her eyes started rolling. All I could see were the whites.

"George! Is this supposed to happen? *George!*"

HE TOOK his time in going to her.

By the time he got there I could see another change. She wasn't breathing rapidly anymore. She didn't seem to be breathing at all.

"George, for God's sake what's wrong!"

He had one of her wrists in his hand. I could see him feeling around for her pulse. He held it for a long time and I kept watching her breathing. There wasn't any.

He dropped her hand finally and turned to me. I was afraid to look at his face. I was afraid to think. I was afraid to do anything.

"Cory."

I had to look at him. I had to tear my eyes away from Ronnie and look at him.

"George, how, how is she?"

"She's dead."

I think in screwy ways. Sometimes words don't mean much to me. Like now. I heard him say it. I know I

heard him say it. He said she was dead. But I knew he couldn't be right. He was a damned liar. He was the damndest liar that ever lived.

"She's dead, Cory. You killed her."

I heard him say that too. I heard him say again that she was dead. I heard him say I killed her. But I didn't care about that. She was dead.

I knew I dropped the gun, because I heard it clatter on the floor a million miles away. I also knew I wanted to shout at him, to tell him he was crazy and then beg him to do something. But I couldn't shout. I couldn't even whisper. I couldn't even see.

It was a funny spinning room that I was standing in. It wasn't really a room. All that was in it was a chair with Ronnie limp and lifeless, and me. Somehow I reached that chair. I fell on the floor beside it and heard my own voice sobbing as I tried to pull her into my arms.

"Ronnie, Ronnie! Oh my God, speak to me, Ronnie! Ronnie, Ronnie!"

She didn't speak. She was wet and limp in my arms. That's all I could feel. Wet and limp and cold. I was holding her in my arms but she wasn't there. She was sitting in the chair and she had talked to me just a few minutes ago, but she wasn't there now. She was wet and limp and cold. Cold. Cold. Cold.

HE WAS a big man. He had broad shoulders that stuck out of his coat like hams. He had on a blue serge suit that needed pressing, and a crop of red hair was sticking out from beneath a blue fedora. It all seemed strangely familiar to me. I had seen this man before. And then I got it. The bar of the Crescent. He was the guy that had kept talking to me while Ronnie was on. Ronnie . . .

Everything cleared. I was on a

leather divan in George's office. My head was propped awkwardly against one of the over-stuffed arms. This big guy was staring down at me. He had his hands in his pockets and his face was big and cold and grim.

"How're you feeling, Stone?"

I knew the voice. And then one of his hands came out of a pocket and he was holding a gun. It was my gun.

"You're not human, Stone. I'd like to use this gun on you. Get off that couch."

I got up slowly and my mouth tasted funny and my clothes were wet with sweat. I said:

"I've seen you before. At the Crescent. What are you doing here?"

His lips curled up at me and for a second or two I thought he was going to use that gun.

"You're going to see a lot of me, Stone. I'm here because you killed your wife. You killed Ronnie Carroll when you killed your wife."

Everything was back now. I looked around. I was in George Bretter's waiting room. I must have fainted and been carried out to the couch. There was light in George's private office, and I could hear voices talking in there.

"My name's Hoban. Lieutenant John Hoban. I'm in charge of the homicide detail. Why did you do it?"

I heard him, but it didn't register. I remembered that Ronnie was in there. Ronnie, dead and cold. Ronnie, whom the people came to see. My Ronnie, and I had killed her. As surely as if I had held the needle that shot death into her arm. I had killed her.

Something bit into my face. It was Hoban's hand. My jaw felt numb for a moment and then started to throb.

"Why did you do it, Stone?"

I looked at him. "She—she was sick. I wanted to help her. . . ."

"You helped her. You helped her

right into a grave. You did it on purpose. I'm going to make you die more than once before they pull the switch on you."

I couldn't think straight and I didn't know what to say. There wasn't anything to say anyway. Just then a group of men came out of George's office. George was one of them. I heard Hoban call one of them aside.

"Well, what about it, doc?"

A little man in gray tweeds and carrying a black leather bag came up to Hoban. He talked rapidly.

"Dr. Bretter was right. She died from an overdose of insulin. The shock was too great for her. That all you want?"

Hoban nodded and turned to George. "He threatened to use the gun on you unless you gave her the drug. Is that right?"

George nodded. I noticed that he didn't want to look at me.

"All right, Stone, let's have it. You forced Dr. Bretter to do it, didn't you?"

I don't think I would have denied it if it had been a lie. All that mattered to me was that Ronnie was dead. She was cold and lifeless in the other room, and I was responsible.

"Yes. I forced him. But he said it would cure her. . . ."

"Okay. That's a confession. There are witnesses here who heard you say it. I'm booking you on suspicion of murder. Come along."

I didn't want to go. I wanted to go into the other room and lay down beside Ronnie and never get up again. But Hoban had my arm and his fingers were like steel ropes. He was trying to hurt me and doing a good job of it.

I went.

THEY had me in a small room with a little table in the middle and a chair. There were no windows, only

a single light that was tipped at an angle and flooding a blinding glare into my eyes. I knew Hoban was in the room because he was doing all the talking. I couldn't see him.

"If you think this is tough, Stone, just wait. I'd beat the living hell out of you but it wouldn't bring her back. I'll be content to sit and watch them strap you in the chair. You're going to fry."

I wished he would beat me. I wished I could get hold of a rubber club myself. I'd have done a lot better job than he could have. I'd have done it up right.

"Say something, you louse! Say something! Why did you do it? Why did you get her sick and make her think she needed insulin? Talk, damn you!"

I lowered my eyes so that they weren't in the glare. I could feel hot sweat running down my neck and making my collar sticky.

"I didn't make her sick. You're wrong. I didn't know it until George said so. He was treating her, trying to get her well again. Even the pills didn't help. She got worse. . . ."

"What the hell are you talking about? What pills?"

"The pills George gave her. They were sedatives. She couldn't sleep. That's what was the matter. She couldn't sleep. She'd lay awake all night and I'd wake up to find her crying and scared. She had a neurosis and she kept getting worse. I wanted to help her. When George said she needed an insulin treatment I made him do it. I killed her. Leave me alone."

He leaned his big Irish face across the table until the light struck it.

"So you thought you were better than a doctor. So you took a gun and dragged her over to his office and made him give her an overdose of insulin.

So you stood there and watched her die and now you feel rotten. Damn you, you ought to feel rotten!"

He leaned forward and before I could turn my head his knuckles smashed into my mouth. I could taste blood.

"Do you know what you've done, Stone? Your jealous mind has robbed the world of something fine and beautiful. You couldn't stand letting us little guys put our elbows on your bar and just look at her. You couldn't let us dream about her and wait until she came on so we could look at her again. No, you had to fix it so we couldn't even look at her. You killed her, damn you to hell!"

I spit the blood out of my mouth. "I wasn't jealous. I loved her more than life—but I wasn't jealous. I wanted her to sing and dance. I wanted to be in the crowd, just like you, and look at her. When I made George give her that drug I thought it would help her. He said it would. I wanted her to get well so she could sing and dance again. Isn't that enough? I know it was my fault—for God's sake let me alone!"

There was silence for a long while. Then suddenly the light clicked off and I was sitting in darkness. Great blue and green blobs swelled in front of me as my eyes tried to focus. Then somebody grabbed my arm and pulled me from the chair.

"That's all for now, Stone. You're a dead duck and you're going to fry. But I'm going to make life miserable for you in the meantime. You can get a lawyer tomorrow if you want one, but it won't do you any good."

He shoved me through the door and I was in a narrow passage with little yellow bulbs in the ceiling. Pretty soon someone kicked me through a cell door and I skidded across the floor. I knew

I was going to be very sick.

I was.

I DON'T know how long I lay there. Time didn't mean anything to me anymore. My life had stopped the moment Ronnie died.

Twice they brought me a tray with food on it. I couldn't eat. There was a single barred window in the wall, and through it rays of sunshine still filtered in. It must have been close to late afternoon.

I heard footsteps stop outside my cell but I didn't look up. There was a jangle of keys and then the door swung open on squeaky hinges. Someone moved beside me.

"Get up, Stone."

I raised my head and saw Hoban. He had on the same blue serge suit and the same fedora. But there was something on his face I hadn't seen there before. I didn't know what it was.

"I told you to get up."

I didn't feel like being kicked anymore so I got up. I didn't feel very good and I had to hang on to the wall for support. He was shoving something under my nose.

"Are these the pills you talked about? In this bottle?"

I looked at what he was holding. It was one of the bottles George had given Ronnie. I nodded.

"That's right. Where did you get them?"

He shoved his other hand forward. He was holding Ronnie's purse. "I got it out of here. I also found a couple more like it in your bedroom. Sit down, Stone, I've got a couple of questions I want to ask you."

I couldn't quite get it. For some reason he wasn't shoving me around. Not that I wanted him to, but I expected it. I sat down.

"Listen, Stone, just how did your

wife get sick? I want the truth."

I told him. I started at the beginning, from that first night when Ronnie got a headache. It sort of brought her back to me just to talk about her.

"Why didn't you take her to any other doctors? Or a hospital?"

I told him I didn't like doctors. I told him what I thought of hospitals.

"But you were perfectly willing to let Dr. George Bretter take care of her. Why?"

"Because George is my best friend. I can't help it if he happened to be a doctor. George knew Ronnie almost as well as I. He wanted to help her. If it hadn't been for me. . . ."

Hoban started swearing. He turned his head away from me and let out a string of words that were as dirty as a coal pile. I didn't know what he was swearing at. I didn't care. I wanted him to get out and leave me alone.

Finally he stopped and looked back at me. "Get up, Stone, you're coming along with me."

I didn't feel like getting up. I was sore and sick and tired of living. "Go where?" I asked him.

"You'll find out when we get there."

I followed him out of the cell and a uniformed cop was waiting to close the door behind us. We ended up in a big room with a lot of desks and tables with cops sitting behind them. Over in one corner a group of men stood in front of a glazed door which had a name written on it: INSPECTOR SMITH. Hoban stopped me.

"You wait here. I'll be right back."

He didn't wait for me to say anything, but walked straight across the room. I saw him talk to the group of men for a minute and then he opened the glass door and went inside. He was gone for about five minutes, then he came back out. He walked over to one of the desks and picked up a tele-

phone. He talked into it for a few minutes and then hung up. Then he came back to me.

"You better straighten up your tie and shirt. We're going out for a little while."

It didn't matter to me where we went. Nothing mattered anymore. I walked over to a small wash basin in one corner. A mirror hung directly over it. My face was puffed and swollen and there were patches of dried blood on my mouth where Hoban had hit me. I washed those off and used my handkerchief to dry my face. Then I did the best I could with my tie and shirt.

"You look all right," he said. "Come on."

I followed him out the door and over to a set of elevators. The Cook County jail has everything.

When we got outside the building he had a car waiting. It was one of those shiny new light blue Fords without any writing on the side. Hoban motioned me into the back and got in beside me. There was another plainclothes man behind the wheel. Hoban grunted at him.

"Okay, Smitty, let's go."

IT SEEMED like we drove for a long time. I stayed over on my side of the seat and it felt very good just to rest my head on the back of it. I didn't care where we were going. We could ride forever.

I could hear Hoban swearing under his breath. I'd look over at him once in awhile but he wasn't looking at me. He was sitting hunched forward on the seat, a big strong Irishman, and his face was a hard mask that went with the swearing. He seemed to be looking out the front windshield, but I knew he wasn't. His eyes had a sort of vacant look in them, as if he were thinking. Maybe all Irishmen swear when they

think.

The driver Hoban had called Smitty suddenly pulled the car over to a curb and stopped. I looked out the window and got a surprise. We were parked right in front of the building where George had his offices. Where Ronnie had died. . . .

"Why are you stopping here?" I asked him. My voice sounded old and had cracks in it.

Hoban stopped swearing and looked at me. "We're going in there, Stone. We're going up to Bretter's office."

I didn't want to go up there. It was the last place in the world I wanted to go. Ronnie had died up there. "Not me. I couldn't stand it!"

He got hold of my arm and nearly lifted me off the seat.

"You are going up there with me, Stone. Just the two of us."

"What for?"

For a moment his arm relaxed. It seemed even his voice grew softer. "You'd like to know what was causing Ronnie sickness, wouldn't you? You'd like to know what was really the matter with her, wouldn't you?"

"It didn't make sense to me. Nothing did any more. Besides, what good would it do now? Ronnie was dead. I had killed her. I had held the gun.

"I'd like to know, but I still don't want to go up there."

He tightened his grip on my arm again, "Listen, Stone. Listen to me very closely. You're going up there, and you're going to do everything I tell you. You're not going to say a word—understand? But you're going to do everything I tell you. Understand?"

I didn't have any choice in the matter. I nodded.

We left the car and the driver stayed behind. There were only the two of us, Hoban and I. We got in an elevator

and he still had a good grip on my arm. We rode up to George's floor and got out.

There was a sign on George Bretter's office. It said: OUT OF TOWN. But that didn't stop Hoban. He rapped sharply on the glazed glass and waited.

A few seconds later the door opened and George was standing there looking at us. I could tell he was pretty surprised to see me. But he wasn't any more surprised than I was.

"I got your call, Lieutenant, and I followed your instructions in closing the office. But why—"

"That's fine, Doctor. All right, Stone; inside."

We went in and Hoban shut the door. I heard him turn the key in the lock and when I looked at the door the key was gone. Hoban motioned to George.

"Let's go in your private office, Doctor. I've got a few little details to straighten out."

George was puzzled. I could tell that by the look on his face. But he turned and led the way.

I tried not to look at the room, but it wasn't any good. It hadn't changed any. The desk was still there, the wall cabinets, and the examining table. And the chair. But it was empty now. They had taken Ronnie away.

HOBAN motioned George over to his desk. Then he took my arm and put me in front of the door. He left me there and walked over to the chair where Ronnie had died. He sat down in it.

"Doctor, we've got this case practically sewed up, but there are a few technical points I've got to straighten out first. Okay?"

George nodded, but he was still frowning. "Of course. What is it you want to know?"

Hoban kept looking at him. "You

diagnosed Ronnie Carroll's case as a neurosis, didn't you?"

"That's right, Lieutenant. Her condition was entirely mental. But of course, neurosis is a broad term. We use it only when we can't pin a person's symptoms down to a physical ailment."

"You were treating her much as a psychiatrist would?"

George nodded. "It seemed the only course practicable."

"But you did give her medicine?"

"Why, yes, I did. I gave her a mild sedative, trying to quiet her nerves. That's a very important point in treating a neurosis patient."

"I see."

Hoban got up from his chair and started pacing the room. I didn't get the drift of what he was trying to do. Least of all did I understand why he had brought me here. I had confessed. It was an open and shut case. Was he trying to torture me like he had promised he would?

"This treatment, Doctor. This insulin that you were forced to administer at the point of a gun—you thought it might cure her?"

George moved around in his swivel chair and shrugged. "I thought it might, but I also knew it was a dangerous step. That's why I refused to try it. I even asked Cory to take her to another doctor."

Hoban stopped pacing. He planted his feet in the rug and stared at George.

"I understand, Doctor. But here is the real point I have to clear up. The way in which you administered that insulin."

George got up and walked around the desk. "That's very simple, Lieutenant. At the point of a gun I took the drug from that wall cabinet, secured a hypodermic syringe, and filled it."

"Show me, Doctor."

It was getting fuzzier all the time. I was standing in front of the door like a sightseer in a circus, only this wasn't a circus and it wasn't amusing. I began to see what Hoban was doing. He was making me live over the whole thing again, bringing it back like a raw sore in my mind. And I couldn't do anything about it.

George moved over to the wall cabinet. He did just as he had done in the early morning. He took out the metal tray with the two big bottles on it and laid it on his desk. Once he glanced over at me and I thought I saw pity in his eyes.

"These are the bottles, Lieutenant. You saw them this morning. Really, I don't see—"

The hypodermic, doctor. You forgot that."

George let out a sigh and went back to the cabinet. He took out the same big hypodermic he had used on Ronnie. No, *he* hadn't used it—it was I who. . . .

"Now, Doctor, we're going to conduct a little experiment. I'm going to ask you to fill that hypo, just as you did this morning, and at the point of a gun I'm going to ask you to use it once more."

I could feel little tingles running up the back of my spine. I didn't know why. And I saw George's jaw drop in surprise.

"Use it? Use it on whom?"

"On yourself, Doctor."

SUDDENLY a gun appeared in Hoban's hand. I didn't see him reach for it, but it was there. And it was my gun. The same gun that I had killed Ronnie with.

"Stone, come over here."

Hoban was calling my name. I didn't know why; my mind wasn't very clear anymore. If he was trying to drive me

crazy he was doing a good job. My feet were dead but I walked over.

"Stone you're going to follow my instructions. You're going to keep your trap shut but you're going to do exactly what I tell you. Take this gun."

I didn't know why I took it. I had never wanted to touch it again. But I took it.

"Now go back to the door and stand there. Keep that gun pointed at Dr. Bretter. Go on!"

I could hear George protesting. I could hear him shouting at Hoban, telling him he'd sue the city and have Hoban's job. I heard him call me a murderer and that Hoban was giving me a chance to escape. I went back to the door and pointed the gun at George. I didn't want to escape. There was no place to go.

"All right, Doctor, fill that hypo. Fill it just like you did this morning and then give yourself the shot."

George screamed at him. "You're mad! Do you think I'd do that?"

"You did it to Ronnie Carroll."

"But that was different! I was forced to do it!"

Hoban turned to me. "You've got the gun, Stone. Go ahead, force him."

If it hadn't been so damned crazy I would have laughed in his face. But I couldn't laugh, and besides, there was something in the way Hoban was acting, the way he kept mentioning Ronnie's name—not to me, but to George. I remembered Hoban had said to me in the car about wanting to know what had caused Ronnie's sickness. It was all very muddy and I was in it up to my neck.

"Go ahead, George," I said. "Do it just like you did it this morning."

George stood rigid and glaring at both of us for a long moment. Then suddenly he relaxed and a faint smile crossed his face. "Very well, I'll do it.

But I warned you, Hoban, I'll get your job for this."

He took the hypodermic and opened one of the big bottles. He stuck it in and filled it. Then Hoban said:

"Now, Doctor, lay that hypo on the desk and back up."

I watched George put the hypo down very slowly. Then he backed up and Hoban picked it up. He also picked up the bottle George had taken the insulin from. He looked at it.

"Stone, come here."

I walked over to where Hoban was standing. He shoved the bottle under my nose.

"Look at that label, Stone. Dr. Bretter filled this hypo at the point of a gun, just like he did this morning. What does that label say?"

I read it and felt a whirring roar in my head. Things were getting clearer every second.

"It says distilled water. Distilled water!"

HOBAN put the bottle down and pressed the plunger on the hypo. Liquid squirted onto the rug. He turned to George.

"You made a little misake, Doctor. But you made a very natural one. We couldn't expect you to fill a hypo with insulin at the point of a gun—not when you've got a bottle of distilled water right next to it—could we?"

Something very dirty and foul was rising up in my mind. Something so fantastic that I couldn't believe it. I could feel a shiver sweep through my body as I looked at George. In a dazed voice I said:

"George! You could have done that this morning! You could have given her distilled water and I would never have known it! She would have been alive!"

"Stone, shut up!" Hoban snapped at

me. "Get back to that door. Get back and keep the gun on Dr. Bretter. Go on!"

I went. With thoughts buzzing in my head like a nest of wasps, I went. I kept the gun pointed at George.

Hoban opened the other bottle on the metal tray. He put the hypo in it and filled it.

"Now, Doctor, we have insulin in this syringe. Ordinarily we mix it with water before an injection, don't we, Doctor? But of course, we can't do that if we want to re-enact the crime—can we?"

George didn't say anything. I didn't say anything. And Hoban put the syringe on the desk and backed up to the far side of the room.

"All right, Doctor, pick it up and inject it into yourself."

George picked it up. He stood looking at it. He looked over at me holding the gun. I knew I was shaking, but the gun wasn't. It was steady and pointed straight at George's chest. Everything was clear now.

"Go ahead, Doctor. You aren't afraid, are you?" Hoban was talking very quietly. "Maybe you need something for your nerves. Maybe you can't sleep at night. Maybe you need a sedative like the one you gave Ronnie Carroll. Here, Doctor, I've got some with me. In this little bottle. I've had them analyzed."

He opened the bottle and poured a couple of the little white pills into his palm. They were the same pills Ronnie had been taking for months.

"The laboratory said they were benzedrine. Did you hear that, Doctor? They're very good for your nerves. They'll keep you awake no matter how hard you try to sleep. They'll wear you down and make you jittery. And then you can go to a doctor and he'll tell you there's something wrong with

your mind. They make a good sedative, Doctor; maybe you'd like to try one before you give yourself that shot?"

I heard what Hoban was saying. I heard every little word and they pounded inside me like the booming thud of a sledge. Benzedrine. A drug to keep you awake. Benzedrine that George had given Ronnie. Benzedrine that was supposed to make her sleep and forget, but kept her awake instead. George had given it to her. George. . . .

Something slammed into me and knocked me to the floor. I didn't see it coming until it was too late. It was George. His fist smashed into my mouth and I felt the gun torn from my fingers.

"Stand still, both of you!"

I heard George's voice as I got to my feet. It seemed to come from a long way off. Then I saw him. He had the gun. He was standing behind his desk with his finger around the trigger. Hoban was still on the far side of the room. He hadn't moved.

"You're a smart man, Hoban, but you're not as smart as I am. I must congratulate you on the way you found me out. I had forgotten about the benzedrine and that Ronnie would still have some lying around. I should have foreseen that; but it doesn't matter now!"

I FOUND my voice. I lifted it up from the choking well it had fallen into. "George! Is this true?"

He curled his lower lip at me and laughed.

"You're a fool, Cory! Of course it's true. I planned the whole thing, just waiting for a chance when Ronnie would complain of some simple illness. I knew you wouldn't let her go to anyone else. I knew you hated doctors and hospitals. But I knew you would trust

me! Poor simple trusting Cory! Of course it's true!"

I started toward him. I knew I would not stop. But my steps were small dead steps and it was going to take me a long time.

"Then this morning—you planned that too!"

"Naturally. I even told you I wouldn't give her the treatment even if you forced me. I know you, Cory. I know you like a book. You played right into my hand!"

I kept on walking. "And you could have saved her life—you could have filled that syringe with water!"

"You're a bright boy, Cory. You're learning fast. Naturally I could have filled it with water. You would never have known the difference!"

My dead feet were walking. I was getting closer. "But why? My God, why? You could have done it to me—not Ronnie!"

He leaned back his head and laughed. "You simple idiot! I'll tell you why! It was because I loved her—I loved her in a way your simple mind could never understand. But she picked you—she married you, a common nightclub owner! You had her and all I could do was look at her! But you'll never look at her again. She was never meant for you—she was meant for me!"

I was at the desk, now. But I couldn't see it. All I could see was George's face. I was going to take it and grind it to a pulp. I remembered that day in the park when Ronnie sobbed into my shoulder and I wanted to run and find the thing that had done that to her. I had found it. I was going to smash it to a pulp and grind my fists in it.

"Stand still, Cory! I've got this gun and I'm going to use it! You too, Hoban—stay where you are." He laughed again. "This is even better

than I expected. I've got both of you and I'm going to kill you and get away with it. You brought a murderer into my office, Hoban, and he tried to kill both of us. It will be self defense and then nobody will ever know the truth!"

His face was only a few inches away now. It was swimming in a red cloud and I was reaching out for it.

I saw the gun as he put it between my eyes. But I couldn't get away from it. I saw his finger pull the trigger and I heard a dry click. I saw him pull it again and heard another click. Then I heard Hoban behind me.

"It's no use, Bretter, the gun's empty. You see, I'm not as dumb as you thought I was."

I heard George scream. Then his body hit mine and I knew my fists were cutting into his face. I felt him arch backwards and fall across the desk. I saw him knock over the metal tray and the bottles fell to the floor. I hit him again and he slipped off the desk. I saw something bright and shiny fall beneath him.

THEN somebody grabbed my arms and I knew it must be Hoban. At the same time I heard a shrill cry from George. He was writhing on the floor and trying to get his hands up behind his back. I saw what he was reaching for.

It was the hypodermic. The syringe that was filled with insulin. Only it wasn't anymore. It was sticking in his back where he had fallen on it, and it was empty.

"Help me! Quick! Glucose—cabinet!"

Hoban held my arms and pulled me back. Then we both stood and watched George. He had twisted again and broken the needle from the hypodermic. He was trying to get to his feet.

"Glucose! . . . Help . . . cabinet

... I'll die!"

Hoban kept holding me. I could hear him swearing. He was swearing a string of words that didn't have an end. He was swearing at George on the flood.

He died there. I saw him die. So did Hoban. He died just like Ronnie. I saw his eyes roll up and his body jerk as he tried to breathe. He died and I wanted him to die all over again.

"Come on, Stone, it's all over."

Hoban let go of me and I grabbed the desk for support.

"He killed Ronnie," I said. "It wasn't me. I held the gun, but he killed her. Ronnie. . . ."

"He's dead, Stone. He got what was coming to him. He loved her, but so did we all. He was one of us little guys but he was a rat. Come on."

He put my gun back into my pocket and led me out. He took me out of the building and called a taxi. He opened the door and shoved me inside.

"You can go home, Stone. I'm sorry if I hurt you, but I didn't know about Bretter until I checked on those pills. And then got to thinking about how he gave her that hypo when he could

have faked it. . . . So long, Stone."

He shut the door and then I was sitting in the back of the cab all alone. The cabby turned his head and asked me where to.

That was a senseless question. Where to? I could go home, but where was home now? Without Ronnie it was just an empty shell, a tomb. Ronnie would be in a tomb pretty soon. They had her in a mortuary now. Yes, that's where I would go. But on the way I'd stop and get a big bouquet of flowers. I'd lay them beside her and stand there and realize what being alone meant.

And after that I'd go home. Back to my apartment. I knew what I would do there. It was all very clear now. I'd turn on the victrola and play the *Largo*, *Going Home*. That was our music. That would bring her a little closer to me. Then she wouldn't be so lonely where ever she was. And then I'd put a bullet in my revolver. I was very lonely too. It wouldn't be so hard. I'd be going home to her, just like our music said.

I told the cabby where to take me.

THE CASE OF MR. HOLT

By GARY LEE HORTON

IT WAS the morning of July 3, 1915. J. P. Morgan, famous Wall Street millionaire, was aroused in his Glen Cove, Long Island, home by a sinister figure brandishing two pistols. Before Morgan had a chance to cry out, the armed stranger succeeded in shooting him in the thigh and groin. Fortunately the wounds were not fatal. On hearing the shots, the Morgan butler, bearing the amazing name Physick, ran to the scene of the attempted assassination and felled the thug with a lump of coal seized from the grate.

In jail, the man admitted that he was Frank Holt, professor of German at Cornell University. He boasted that his motive was to halt the shipment of munitions to the Allies by liquidating Morgan who was the center of the munitions industry. Questioned further, Holt admitted that this was not the only crime he had committed against his adopted country. He openly flaunted the fact that it was he who had set off a bomb

in the Senate cloak room in Washington, D. C., the day before.

From the photographs the Cambridge police were able to identify Professor Holt as Erich Muentner, one time instructor at Harvard, wanted for the poisoning of his wife.

Holt's career ended shortly afterward when he committed suicide while in prison. But the fanatic had one last mission to perform, even after death. In a letter left for his wife, he revealed that he had planted dynamite on one of the ships leaving New York for the European front a week before. He warned that an explosion should be expected at sea the following Wednesday. The world waited with baited breath. Then, on the appointed day, came the word that the S. S. Minnehaha had reported an explosion at sea, fortunately slight. It was impossible to definitely establish whether or not it was due to Holt, alias Muentner.

Murder Rides High

By LEONARD FINLEY HILTS



Buzz reached blindly for the crash phone and began to bellow instructions

They told Buzz his flying days were over. But when a killer broke loose he remembered that a man may have bad nerves but an excellent nerve!

BUZZ FORD was sore. His anger hung over his desk in the Operations Office like a nimbo-cumulus getting ready to spit thunder and lightning. He stretched his long legs and moved his arms nervously, trying to accustom himself to the feel of a swivel chair. He scowled as his knees knocked into the sides of the desk. Damn it, he wasn't built for a desk. It had been a week since he took over as Operations Officer, and he still felt like a ship in dry dock.

Swivel chair jockey, that's what he was. From fighter pilot to pencil pusher in one easy physical exam.

He held his hands up and examined them closely, then dropped them back to the desk blotter. They shook a little, but hell, that didn't mean a guy couldn't fly. Fifteen months of punching fifty caliber holes in Jap Zeros would make anyone a litt shaky, but it didn't necessarily affect his ability to throw a Hellcat around the sky. But just try and tell a flight surgeon that. Yeah, just try.

Tommy Reynolds glided up to his desk. He was still in flight coveralls and helmet, and his face was grimy from his recent hop.

"Hi, Buzz boy," Tommy grinned. "You look as though you need a few of the chaplain's choice words of sympathy. What's corroding your soul?"

Buzz glared at the stocky blonde flyer and growled. "He'll be reading a memorial service for you in a minute, chum," he replied, "if you don't cut the merry sunshine act." Then he



added, "Damn it, I'll bet you're even cheerful with a hangover."

Tommy pushed a pile of papers from the corner of the desk and deposited his bulky frame where they had been. "Okay," he said, "so you're not happy in the Navy. Tell me the sad story."

Buzz pushed himself out of the swivel chair so hard that the chair bounced off the wall in back of his desk. "Nuts! You'd be griped too, if you'd got the keelhauling I just had."

Tommy's face softened. "The Skipper give you hell this morning because of the crashes?" he asked.

Buzz nodded and combed his unruly black hair with his fingers. He took three strides across the office and whipped around. "Look, Tommy, I didn't ask for a damned desk job. The flight surgeon just said, 'You look nervous, better sit on the ground for three months.'"

"I know that, Buzz," Tommy said soothingly. "But what did the Skipper say?"

"Oh hell," Buzz shrugged, "he just said that he would give me twenty-four hours to prove that the two crashes this morning weren't my responsibility. If I don't prove it, he's going to court martial me for gross negligence in the line of duty."

Tommy looked at him, startled. "Hey, that's serious. But how can they court martial *you*? You had nothing to do with them."

"No, but my men did. They're supposed to see that every plane that takes off is ready for flight. Both of these planes took off, then dived for the end of the runway. Of course, they exploded and burned when they hit, but the Skipper says it looks like the planes weren't checked and took off with faulty controls."

"So you get the rap," Tommy put in, "because your men dropped the ball."

Buzz nodded. "Skipper said I didn't stay on 'em enough. That I was griped about being grounded, and didn't do the job I was given. So I'm all set for a pack of trouble."

BEFORE Tommy could add his opinion, the wail of the crash siren split the air. The two officers looked at each other for a fraction of a second. Tommy's eyes were full of sympathy, Buzz's full of fear. Here came more trouble.

Buzz jumped to his feet and grabbed at the crash phone beside his desk in

one motion. His eyes swept the criss-crossing runways of the Lake Monroe Naval Air Station. At the far end of the runway-in-use a plume of black smoke spiralled skyward from a burning heap of shattered plane. It had hit with terrific impact from a hundred feet in the air, and flames licked at the broken fuselage.

The yellow trucks of the field crash crew were already streaking across the field toward the scene.

"Stand by on the crash circuit," Buzz intoned in a deep voice that was surprisingly steady. "An F6F has just spun in on the downwind end of runway two-seven, and is burning. Dispensary, send an ambulance and doctor; photo jeep, crane, and engineering crew go to the scene. No further action need be taken for the present. Secure your phones."

Now a mixture of different voiced sirens filled the air. The ambulance from the dispensary and the photo jeep howled from their posts. Knots of people gathered in front of the hangars and stared across the field at the frantic efforts of the crash crew to save the pilot's life.

Tommy was examining the crash through powerful field glasses. "The crash crew has the fire under control," he reported. "But it looks as if the pilot hadn't a chance." Buzz took the glasses and nodded in agreement.

He watched the flames surrender to the foamite hoses of the crash crew. He could see now that all that was left of the plane was a smouldering mass of molten metal. He had seen men die often enough, but it still made him sick. When they died in a plane crash you stood by and watched, as helpless as if it were happening on a movie screen in front of your eyes. You kept saying to yourself, "He'll get out," but you knew he wouldn't.

"No chance at all, Tommy," Buzz said. "And that makes three in one day." He reached across his desk and pushed a button on the intercom box. "Tower from Operations. Who was the pilot of that plane?"

"Lieutenant Nichols, sir," the tower answered. "The plane was Fox seven two. It happened just like the other two crashes this morning. We couldn't see any reason for it happening."

Buzz made a few notes in his log while Tommy lit a cigarette and drew heavily on it.

"Wow!" Tommy said finally, shaking his head and exhaling an expanding cloud of bluish smoke. "Three senior instructors in one day! That just doesn't make good sense."

"It'll make sense to the Skipper," Buzz said gloomily. "He's probably convening the court martial board right now."

Tommy smoked in silence for a while. Then his face brightened. "Oh, I almost forgot," he said, hoping to change the subject. "I came here in the first place to tell you about the sight I saw at the gate when I came in this morning."

Buzz was sitting behind his desk again, building steeples with his fingers. He looked up without much interest.

"I drove up just behind a taxi cab," Tommy went on cheerfully, "just in time to see a strange character get out. He claimed that he was an ensign going through operational training here. But the funny thing was, all that guy had on was his underwear. I almost croaked when I saw him."

Buzz grinned in spite of himself. "I'll bet the Marine Guard had a great time with him," he said.

Tommy nodded. "Yeah, they gave him a pretty bad time. His story was that somebody conked him and stole his uniform, his money and his identifica-

tion card. I think they threw him in the brig until they could check his story."

"Probably got tangled up with some local witch," Buzz noted dryly, "and had to make a hasty exit before her old man could aim his shot gun."

"Speaking from experience?" Tommy asked with a sidelong glance at him.

Buzz reached for his telephone and shrugged. "Could be," he answered. He started twirling the dial with a pencil. "Now I've got to see if I can find out what these crashes are all about."

Tommy gave him a farewell pat on the shoulder. "See you later. I've got a hop now. And I hope you have some luck."

AN HOUR later Buzz studied the notes on his scratch pad. A deep frown creased his forehead, and his blue eyes were clouded with worry. There was something screwy somewhere, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

Three instructors, all of them back from the fleet and all of them pilots with several thousand hours in the air, had spun in. They got off the ground and began to turn away from the field when suddenly they peeled off, dived into the runway and exploded. And when the debris was cleared away after each crash there was nothing but the charred remains of the pilot and a twisted mound of metal. No way of telling what had caused the crash.

Buzz drew figure eights on the scratch pad and the furrows in his forehead got deeper. He checked his notes again.

"Line crew says planes were checked this morning before takeoff," he read. "Only people seen around the planes all day were mechs, students, and instructors. Each of the three men who crashed was flying his own plane."

There was nothing there to excite his

suspicions. Everything was normal. Too normal, considering what had happened. Buzz rested his forehead on the palm of his hand and tried to figure it out. He was sure that some fact was eluding him, but he couldn't grab it.

His eyes avoided the last note on the page.

"Report to the Skipper's office at ten in the morning."

The note was as crisp and impersonal as the Skipper's voice had been when he phoned. Buzz was to be court martialled for "gross negligence in the line of duty," and "being partially responsible for the death of three men."

Buzz put the thought of what he had to face in the morning out of his head. Instead he drove himself by thinking that he had until that time to find that elusive fact, to prove that he hadn't been responsible for the crashes. He knew that such proof was the only thing that could save him from the court martial.

He paced back and forth in his office. "There's something missing," he kept saying to himself. "Something that I know already but can't remember." He slugged and cudgled his brain until it cringed at the idea of thinking any more.

And then he got it.

What he got didn't make sense, but it was something to work on. He headed out of the Operations Office. He stopped in the Records Office long enough to find the dossiers of the three men who had been killed. He took the bulging manila folders to his office and settled down at his desk. He made a chart for each of the men, showing a general outline of his career in the Navy. Then he sat back to study what he had.

He didn't know what he was looking for, but he hoped he would recognize it when he found it.

"WHITEY GARNER," he read from his irregular scrawl, "trained at Pensacola and Jacksonville. Spent eleven months in the fleet, got nine Japs definitely. Received the Purple Heart, a DFC, two Air Medals. Was returned to the Lake Monroe Naval Air Station as an instructor."

Buzz scowled. Nothing there that gave any indications as to why the crashes might have occurred. He continued to read.

"Garner put seven flights through the training syllabus and was rated as an A-1 instructor. As a senior instructor he sat on the Washout Board for three months."

"Doesn't prove anything except that it shouldn't have happened," Buzz said aloud.

He turned to Tim Muslowski's record. It was substantially the same as Garner's. And so was Pete Nichol's. The awards and the number of Japs shot down were different, but the records were similar in all other respects.

Similar! An idea flashed across the back of Buzz's mind like a streak of lightning. Of course they were similar. They had all sat on the Washout Board together. The three of them, plus Tommy Reynolds, had sat on the same Washout Board for three months.

Now the ideas began to marshall themselves in Buzz's head. Same Washout Board, killed the same day, in the same way. Buzz ground his knuckles into the top of his desk. Altogether too many similarities.

Suddenly, in Buzz's mind, two and two added up to murder. But knowing that he had a murderer on his hands was no help. Who did it and why? Would he try it again? The questions nagged at him.

Then Buzz thought of a way to check his murder theory. He had to have some definite proof and this might give

it to him. He grabbed at his hat as he left the office.

"LISTEN, Tommy," Buzz told him an hour later, "you're grounded for the rest of the day. No more flying."

Tommy all but jumped him. "What the hell do you mean, grounded? I've got a flight of students who have to finish here next week. Knock off the baloney."

Buzz pulled a length of control cable from his desk drawer. "Since that last crash I've been checking up a little. You've been flying a spare plane all day, haven't you?"

Tommy nodded. "My own plane was getting a new set of spark plugs and having the radio checked."

"Well, I went down to have a look at your own plane. That cable came from the ailerons. Have a good look at it."

Tommy fingered the cable carefully. At one point it was frayed almost to the breaking point. Someone had taken a sharp instrument and had worked on it.

"When you took off you would have made a turn as soon as you were clear of the end of the runway," Buzz told him. "And when you turned, the strain would have broken the cable. You would have joined Nichols and the others. See what I mean?"

Tommy whistled. "Jeez, Buzz, that was a narrow one. I owe you a lot for catching this before it caught me. But how do you know someone else isn't going to get it? It looks like sabotage to me. Better cancel flying for the day, until you can have every plane carefully checked."

Buzz shook his head. "Hope. I don't think we have to worry. There were four marked men on this base. All of you sat on the Washout Board together. The other three got it, and you were the next victim."

"Okay, okay," Tommy said hastily. "Consider me grounded until further notice. But how about catching the guy who's doing all of this. Do you know who it is?"

Buzz shrugged his shoulders. "I wish I knew the answer to that one myself, but I don't. I haven't even got a lead in that direction, except that it's probably someone you washed out, and who has a grudge."

"Hell," exploded Tommy. "There are a lot of people in that group. And I don't think any of them are around here now. That doesn't make too much sense to me."

Buzz shoved his hands deep into his pockets. "Maybe you're right. But what else can we work on? It's got to be somebody on the base. And from the way things look, it might have been anyone. Any man aboard this station could have gotten near those planes without arousing suspicion."

Tommy frowned, which was an unusual facial display for him. "I can't think of any enemies I have who'd go so far as to want to kill me. And I damn sure can't think of any that all four of us might have made, unless some of the boys we washed out resented it. But as I said, they shipped out of here after the board meeting."

Buzz sat down again and stared at the point of his pencil, concentrating until his eyes crossed. He threw the pencil down quickly. "That's enough of that," he told himself. "Better forget it for a while."

"Hey Tommy," he said suddenly. "What happened to the guy in his underwear? Did you ever find out?"

Tommy grinned. "Yeah, I heard that they checked his identification through his fingerprints. He was stationed here all right. Then I guess they checked his story in town, and it seems to fit. Some guy actually sapped

the kid and stole all of his stuff."

Buzz laughed, thinking of a man standing in the middle of the street in nothing but his skivvies, hailing a taxi cab. "I wonder why the hell anyone would want to steal. . . ." He stopped, his hand poised in midair. "Hey, wait a minute! That might be the answer," he yelled.

Tommy jumped, a puzzled expression playing about his features. "Whad-dayamean—answer? Are we playing games now?"

BUZZ left his desk and walked over to his friend. "Don't you see, Tommy. Somebody stole that kid's uniform and ID card. He could get on the base with them. And he could be running around loose on the base now. He could have gone down to the planes and fixed those cables, and nobody would have noticed him. He would look like any one of the two hundred students we have here. That must be it."

Tommy placed a thoughtful finger at the point of his chin and nodded slowly. "Yeah, Buzz. That could be." He thought for a while longer. "Say, maybe this ensign has some idea as to what his attacker looks like. I'll tear over and have a little talk with him."

"Okay," Buzz answered. "And call me when you have the dope, so I can start working on it down here."

Tommy left without saying more, while Buzz continued to ponder the thing. He alternately rocked violently in his swivel chair and paced the floor in long, nervous strides.

Spun in? Buzz knew how that had been worked. The murderer had nosed around the ready room until he discovered which planes his intended victims were to fly. Then he went down to the flight line and fixed the cables in those planes. It was customary for student pilots to examine the planes

thoroughly before their first flight. And anyone seeing him in an ensign's uniform would take it for granted he was familiarizing himself with the control mechanisms of the plane.

The beauty of the setup was that when the planes hit from a hundred feet they exploded, leaving no traces. Fortunately Buzz had the cable from Tommy's plane for evidence. And then, when the murderer had finished his business, he would go out the same way he came in. Through the main gate on the stolen pass and in the stolen uniform. He would just disappear.

Buzz reached for the phone again. "There's one sure way to stop that." He dialed the number of the Marine Guard at the gate.

"Hello, Marine Guard? This is the Operations Officer. What was the name of the ensign who came in without his uniform today? R. J. McDaniels? Well, I want all officers leaving the base checked very carefully. Compare the pictures on their ID cards with the men themselves. And when Ensign R. J. McDaniels attempts to go through the gate, stop him at all costs, even if you have to shoot. Got that?"

When he put down the phone, Buzz looked up into the ugly muzzle of a small automatic.

"VERY clever, *sir*," the man behind the gun snarled. He was dressed in the uniform of an ensign. His face was young, clean shaven, and masculine looking. Buzz thought that he could almost have been called handsome. But his eyes changed that. They were the wild, glazed eyes of a mad man.

"What the hell do you want?" Buzz demanded and started to his feet.

The man laughed and then his laugh faded into a snarl. "Don't move yet, *sir*." The "*sir*" came out as a bitter,

sarcastic slur. "I wouldn't want to have to kill you too. You're not on my list."

Buzz had felt the cold fear of death before going into battle many times, and he felt it again when he first looked up the businesslike muzzle of the gun. But now, as always happened, the fear wore off quickly and his nerves became as taut and tough as piano wire. He settled back in his chair nonchalantly.

"So I was right," he said calmly to the man with the gun. "I don't know your name, but I know how you got here. I know you murdered three men this morning. I can't tell you why you murdered them, but I have a pretty good idea."

The man sat opposite Buzz, so that he could watch the door of the office and the Operations Officer. "You *are* clever, *sir*." Again the "sir" was heavily accented. "I may have to kill you too. You know that four men decided to sit judgment on me, and decided that I wasn't fit to be a Navy flier. They washed me out and I was made a civilian again. I'm going to be drafted soon as a private in the army, thanks to them, and I wanted to square things before I went. So I came back to show them that they weren't as smart as they thought."

"When the Navy washes a man out there's always a good reason for it," Buzz reminded him. "It was probably better for you that way."

The man waved his gun. "That's for me to decide. And I decided that they didn't give me a fair break." His eyes gleamed dangerously. "I think you know too much," he said, squinting, "so I'd better put you on my list too. And as long as you're going to die, you might as well have the satisfaction of knowing my name. I'm Bill DeWitt."

"I can't say that I'm glad to meet you, DeWitt," Buzz answered. "But I

promise you that you'll never get away with this."

DeWitt grinned. "No? Well, we'll see. You threw a monkey wrench into my original plans, but I think I can change them and still accomplish my work."

Buzz was silent, memorizing the features of the man in front of him.

DeWitt consulted his watch. "Time to start," he said. "Stand up!"

Buzz shrugged his shoulders and did as he was told.

"Now pick up the phone," DeWitt ordered, "and tell the line chief to warm up a fighter for you. Make it one of those parked right in front of the building here."

So that was his plan of escape! Buzz had thought that he had his man trapped, but now he saw that he was outwitted. He whirled and plunged for the figure standing half way across the room from him.

"I will like hell," he shouted as he plunged.

FLAME spewed from the gun, and

Buzz felt his shoulder rip open. At the same time DeWitt brought his foot up and caught Buzz in the stomach. The distance between them had been too great for Buzz. He fell back against the wall, hit his head against it, and slouched down, groggy and winded.

One thing stayed in his mind. No help would come to the office because most likely the sound of the shot had been drowned out by the roar of the planes warming up and taking off. He tried to move as he saw DeWitt pick up the phone, but he couldn't. His arm was nearly paralyzed, and his head was spinning.

"This is the Operations Officer," DeWitt said in low tones into the phone. "I want a fighter warmed up in front of my office, ready to go in five min-

utes. Put a parachute in it."

He looked over at Buzz as he hung up the phone. "I see that I didn't need your help after all. As soon as I said Operations Officer that boy was ready to jump. Now I'll wait here a few minutes, until my plane is ready to take off, and then I'll leave you to your dreams. They will probably be very nice dreams, full of hot lead and things like that, because you'll be dead."

Buzz was furious. He had been outwitted and beaten. Now he was cringing on the floor before the man who had beaten him. He felt his anger rising in his throat. Rage blinded him. Summoning his last bit of strength, he pulled himself from the floor and started for DeWitt. DeWitt backed away and pulled the trigger, but the gun misfired. Buzz tackled him.

They rolled around on the floor. Buzz flailed his fists into his opponent as hard as he was able, but he was still groggy and his left arm was almost useless, while DeWitt was fresh and whole. DeWitt got his right arm free and planted a terrific uppercut under Buzz's chin. The flyer went down in a heap, still fighting for consciousness.

DeWitt got up and brushed himself off. He checked his gun to see that the faulty round was out. But before he could get the round changed, he heard footsteps in the corridor outside of the office. Without waiting for anything else, he jammed the gun deep in his pocket and walked from the office. Two men were at the far end of the hall, approaching. He walked away from them quickly, came to a stairway, and started running for the plane.

IT WAS several minutes before Buzz was able to rouse himself again. His stomach hurt and his jaw hurt. His vision was fuzzy and his left arm screamed whenever he moved it. But

finally he was able to drag himself over to the squawk box.

"Tower from Operations," he said into the box. "Radio the crash truck at the end of the runway that the field is closed. No more planes will take off until further notice."

The voice of the tower operator came back filled with amazement. "Aye aye, sir," he answered, but he meant, "You're nuts, sir."

Just then there was a roar in front of the hangar. Buzz staggered to the window in time to see DeWitt start to taxi out to the takeoff strip. When he was part of the way out, DeWitt noticed that the crash crew was stopping all planes from taking off. The taxiway he was on was only twenty degrees out of the wind, so he gunned his plane and took off down the taxiway.

Buzz chewed his lip. Damn it, couldn't anything stop that madman?

His senses were beginning to return again, and he knew that there was only one thing to do. He called and had another fighter warmed up. "And see that the guns are loaded," he added before he hung up.

Then he called the tower again on the squawk box. "Keep an eye on that plane that just took off from the taxiway. I'm going after him and I'll want to know which direction he went in."

While he waited for the plane crew to warm and load his ship, he went into the washroom and bathed his head in cold water. He moved his left arm gingerly, found that it responded but that the movement was painful. He wrapped a towel around the wound to stop the flow of blood.

He got into his flight gear without once remembering that he was grounded for three months. All he thought of was the fact that here at last he had the answer to the questions the

court martial board would ask.

Before leaving the washroom he took a long pull from the refrigerated fountain. The cold water took the heavy taste of blood from his mouth, and his head cleared a little.

Once ready for flight, Buzz dashed back into the office before going to the plane, and made a hurried call to the Marine Guard. "This is the Operations Officer again," he said. "I'll be taking off in a few minutes in an F6F, and I want a jeep with four fully armed marines to follow the plane as rapidly as possible."

He stopped while the information was passed around the gate house.

"I'm going to have to shoot down a plane," he went on, "and if the pilot gets out alive I want him caught. So I want the men to be on the spot as soon as they can. I'll fly low over the gate house and rock my wings so that you can identify me. Got that?"

He slammed the phone into its cradle and went down to the plane.

WITHIN five minutes Buzz was buckled into his plane, with the engine turning over. The chocks were pulled and he moved away from the flight line. He didn't taxi all the way out, but followed DeWitt's example, and took off down the taxiway. As soon as he was off the ground, Buzz horsed back on the stick and headed for altitude. He passed over the gatehouse and saw the jeep start out.

"Navy Monroe Tower, this is Ford. Over."

"Go ahead, Mr. Ford," the tower returned.

"What's the position of that runaway plane now?" Buzz asked.

"Take a heading of three-three-zero, sir. He's about fifteen miles ahead of you on that course. We had the glasses on him until he disappeared."

"Wilco from Ford."

Buzz moved his throttle to the full position after setting his prop at maximum RPM. The Hellcat began to pick up speed. Then he brought the RPM back to its most efficient point for a climb. He levelled off at 5000 feet, and his eyes scanned the horizon.

A speck appeared ahead and slightly below him. Buzz glued his eyes to it, sure that here was his quarry. Two Hellcats, he thought, tangled up in a dogfight, with the same speed and maneuverability. That meant it would be strictly a question of pilots. Buzz knew that he had the experience on his side.

He adjusted the throttle and mixture control to get the most speed from the two thousand horses that were pulling him along. He hoped that the pilot of the other plane didn't know a Hellcat too well. A man with a lot of hours in it can always make fine adjustments in the trimming of the ship and in the engine to squeeze a few extra knots out of it. Otherwise the chase would go on until they both ran low on fuel.

"You aren't going to get away this time, mister," Buzz said through his teeth as he urged his plane on. "You'll never get a chance to tell your story now. Not if I can help it."

Wait a minute, Buzz thought. I can't kill him. If I do I won't have any proof. If he dies I won't be able to tie up the crashes with the incident at the gate. No, he's got to come back alive, so that he can tell the Skipper all about it. Okay, brother, you're going to get winged where it won't hurt, but you aren't going to be able to fly any more.

The speck ahead of him was growing larger. Buzz coaxed a few more knots from his ship. Then his eye caught the cylinder head temperature gauge. The engine was getting hot from running at maximum speed for so long a period. The red pointer on the dial had already

gone into the zone marked "danger." Buzz knew that in a few minutes the engine would start running rough, and then would cut out altogether.

But he couldn't cut down his speed. He couldn't afford to lose his man now, just when he had him. Too much depended on him.

"I'll have to risk it," Buzz told himself. The speck was now another plane and Buzz could see the markings clearly. He picked up another thousand feet of altitude, and then nosed over into a shallow dive. The added speed of the gentle dive brought him up to his opponent quickly. Buzz charged his guns and gave them a test burst.

The pilot of the other plane saw him now, and began evasive maneuvers. He made a sharp turn toward Buzz, and before Buzz could react the other plane had passed below him. Buzz pulled his nose up and made a tight nose-high turn. His opponent attempted to turn back into him again, but he had waited too long. Buzz made another tight turn as DeWitt passed under him for the second time, and was on his tail.

He grinned. DeWitt didn't know much about the fundamentals of dog-fighting. After he made his first turn he had flown in a straight line too long before turning again, and had given Buzz the opportunity he was waiting for. It was a common mistake of beginners.

"O.K., guy, you're through now," Buzz yelled over the roar of his engine. He followed the flipper turn that DeWitt executed and pulled his nose inside of the turn. Through his illuminated gunsight he computed the lead necessary to hit the engine of the other plane without injuring the pilot.

But before he could squeeze the trigger, his engine cut out. Buzz had been so interested in following the other plane that he hadn't noticed the period

of rough running, and now it had quit cold. Buzz swore fluently and levelled off. He went to work in the cockpit, trying to get the engine turning over again.

HE OPENED the cooling vents, turned his emergency fuel pump on, and jockeyed the throttle. He was gliding downwards, losing five hundred feet of his precious altitude every minute. He leaned to the side of the cockpit and picked out an empty field below for an emergency landing.

But he pulled his head back quickly. The spat-spat of fifty caliber machine gun bullets plunking into his plane came to his ears. Damn the bastard, Buzz thought. He must have stolen one of the gunnery planes, all loaded up for a gunnery practice hop. Buzz saw that the first burst had peppered his wing tip with neat round holes.

Buzz heard the second burst now, splattering against the armor plate in back of him. Buzz squirmed, knowing that a fifty caliber would puncture armor plate. The guy had the aim but he was firing at the extreme range. Otherwise Buzz would have been finished. But Buzz knew it wouldn't be long before DeWitt closed that range. And then. . . .

Buzz went after the cockpit controls with renewed interest. Now it was either get the engine started or get shot up. He checked the temperature gauge and found that the open cooling vents had brought it almost back to normal. Buzz was perspiring as he checked the switches.

Another burst from the plane behind him! This time the sliding hatch over Buzz's head shattered. And then with a roar of power, Buzz's engine cut back in again.

With a whoop of relief Buzz laid his Hellcat over in a vertical turn to the

right. Then he snapped the stick back into his stomach, did a vertical reverse so that he came out in a tight turn to the left. The sudden maneuver caught DeWitt by surprise. He was still following Buzz's first turn when Buzz brought his guns to bear.

He let go a heavy blast at close range, directly into the engine of the other Hellcat. It was a head-on shot and his slugs tore great holes in the banked cylinders. Black oil smoke poured from the gaping wounds. Buzz swerved from the staggering path of the crippled fighter to avoid a collision. Then he circled and watched.

Nothing happened at first. "Get out of that thing, you bastard," Buzz screamed. "You've got to get out!"

Then he saw DeWitt slide the hatch back and go over the side. Within a few seconds the white parachute blossomed out. Buzz went down to a thousand feet and circled the figure dangling from the end of the shroud lines.

"I ought to chop you up with this prop for what you've done," Buzz said, "but I need you too much." Then he grinned as he thought of shroud lines. Yes, those silken cords by which DeWitt was hanging from his chute were shroud lines in more ways than one.

Buzz followed the gently oscillating parachute until it had settled in a clearing below him. He watched DeWitt struggle with the lines until he was cleared. Then he saw him start running across the field toward a patch of woods.

"No you don't," Buzz shouted. "You're staying here until the marines come. You've gotten away often enough today."

Measuring the fleeing pilot's path, Buzz opened up with a burst of fifties right in front of him. DeWitt dived to the ground. Everytime he moved Buzz let a burst dig up the earth near

him. DeWitt cringed, staring up at the plane. He hugged the ground but made few attempts to break away.

Finally the jeep with the marines in it came into sight, bouncing down a little side road. Buzz grinned as he thought of the rugged ride they must have had to arrive as quickly as they had.

He flew lower and did a tight circle over the spot where DeWitt lay huddled. The advancing marines saw him and waved. The jeep turned off the road and headed out into the clearing. It stopped a hundred feet from DeWitt, and the four marines, with Thompson sub-machine guns, approached him. DeWitt, seeing that resistance in the face of so much fire power was useless, gave up without a struggle.

Even from the air, Buzz could see that DeWitt had been badly frightened by his chattering fifties.

When Buzz saw the marines leading their prisoner toward the jeep, he rocked his wings and turned the nose of his ship for home.

"See you later, DeWitt," he shouted happily.

WHEN Buzz walked into the Operations Office, Commander Cales, the Skipper, was sitting behind his desk waiting for him. Before Buzz could open his mouth, Cales lit in.

"Ford, this has gone far enough. First you are indirectly responsible for the deaths of three of our best instructors. And then you have the gall to fly one of our planes when you know that you're grounded. I hope you've got a good explanation, because if you haven't, you're going to see the insides of hell before your time."

Buzz started to explain, but the Skipper cut in again. "Say, what in hell happened to you? You look as though you tangled with a prop and came out

on the short end."

Buzz grinned sheepishly and looked down at himself. Blood from his shoulder wound had soaked through his coveralls. There was a lump on his jaw that was probably black and blue. And he knew that he must be pale from weakness and loss of blood.

"Well, sir, you see . . ."

Larry Reynolds burst into the office. "It's no soap, Buzz. I talked with that ensign and he doesn't . . ." he stopped short. "Jeez, Buzz, what hit *you*?" He reached out and touched the spot of blood on Buzz's coveralls. Buzz winced as a knife of pain slashed through him, and then folded like an accordion.

Tommy jumped and grabbed him as he fell. He stretched the prostrate form on the floor, and by the time that Buzz was lying flat the Skipper was back with a glass of water.

"Here," Cales said, "make him drink some of this while I phone the dispensary for a doctor and an ambulance."

BUZZ regained consciousness before the ambulance arrived. As he opened his eyes he saw the Skipper and Tommy talking.

"Ford," Commander Cales said, "Reynolds here has told me as much of your story as he knows. Suppose you finish it now."

Buzz sat up to finish the glass of water and then began. He told the whole story. When he had finished, the Skipper just stared at him with big, dumb-founded eyes.

"Well I'm damned!" he snorted. "If that isn't the damndest! And right here on this . . . Ford, you said the marines are bringing this . . . this, murderer back with them?"

"Yes sir," Buzz replied. "I saw them drive away from the clearing with DeWitt in the jeep."

The Skipper went to the phone quickly. While he was giving orders to have DeWitt delivered to him, the doctor and two hospital corpsmen came in with a stretcher. They lifted Buzz gently and put him on it. The Skipper bent over Buzz before the medics carried him away.

"Ford, you've done a great job, and I owe you all kinds of apologies. The court martial business is off. But I'll have to give you a few days restriction."

Buzz was surprised. "Restriction? You mean I'm restricted to my room. What for, sir?"

"Well, you flew when you were grounded, and that's a pretty serious offense." Cales turned to the doctor, who had been examining Buzz's wound. "Say doc, how long before this hot rock will be out of bed?"

"Oh three or four days. He'll be all right. Nothing to worry about."

"Well, then, Ford, you're restricted to your quarters until you are allowed out of bed by the doctor." There was a twinkle in Cales' eyes as he said this. "And maybe we can get your ungrounded," he added. "If you can fly well enough to do what you did this afternoon, I don't see why you should sit around an office."

Buzz felt himself fading again, so he just grinned and said to the two corpsmen who were carrying the stretcher, "Lead on MacDuffs, and don't fire until you see the lace on their panties." He passed out again, this time with a happy look on his face.

THE END



THE GREEN MAN IS HERE!



MEET HIM IN THE SEPTEMBER ISSUE OF AMAZING STORIES

ON THE BACK OF A BUG

THE authorities of the San Antonio, Texas, jail, were in a quandary. Try as they might, they could not discover how the prisoners in solitary confinement were getting cigarettes. However diligently they searched, they could not discover how it was done.

The mystery was finally solved by a reporter from the *San Antonio Light*. Tipped off by a prisoner who himself had just been released from solitary, the reporter took up a vigil one night in the corridor. When quiet had descended on the halls, a tiny figure approached him, staggering down the row of cells. As the figure entered the ghastly circle of light, the reporter drew back

startled. It was a huge cockroach. On the roach's back a cigarette had been fastened with a piece of adhesive. When the insect arrived at the solitary confinement cells, a hand reached through the bars and quickly removed the cigarette. Then the roach turned and retraced its steps.

Finally the prisoners confessed that they had trained the cockroach, named Oscar, to be an expert in cigarette transportation. During the daytime they had carefully concealed Oscar in a small cardboard box. The clever trick earned the prisoners much publicity, and a photograph of Oscar with a full load of cigarettes was published in the *San Antonio Light*.—*June Lurie.*

CAMERA-EYE DICK

BEFORE the days when the fingerprint was used to identify criminals, John M. Shea startled his detective colleagues and the underworld with his amazing photographic memory. Forty thousand portraits were imprinted indelibly in the mind of Shea, who was able to penetrate disguises and recognize men from their boyhood pictures. Shea was known as the Bertillon superintendent in charge of the Rogue's Gallery of the St. Louis Police Department. So uncanny was his memory and power of recognition that criminals often avoided the St. Louis area. It was considered dangerous ground.

One of Shea's most noted feats was the recognition of a criminal he hadn't seen for eighteen years. The man was known as one of the best of pickpockets. When hardly eighteen years old he

had been arrested in his room in a St. Louis hotel, and then escaped from the hands of the police. Eighteen years later he returned to the city for the first time following his arrest. He was then thirty-six years old; a mustache altered his matured face.

One night Shea was moving among a crowd when on the platform of a street car he caught sight of this face. It was enough. He overtook the car within a block, and grasping the man's arm said, "come along, Harry."

"This is an outrage!" exclaimed the pickpocket. "I am a reputable physician." He displayed a business card that apparently corroborated his statement. Shea answered by taking him from the car. At headquarters it was proved that Shea was right.—*R. Clayton.*

MISER'S FARE

WILLIAM MARSH RICE at eighty-two still didn't believe that you can't take it with you. He clung tight to his six million dollars as if the money contained the key to the Pearly Gates. No man's friend, he was obsessed with the feeling that someone was trying to get his millions away from him.

It was 1897. The old man was alone. Mrs. Rice had died after unsuccessful treatment out of the state. So miserly was her mate, that he refused to part with the money to ship her body back to Texas for burial. Although Mrs. Rice had never had any money in her own right she had willed \$1,500,000 of her husband's money to provide for her family and friends after her death. But, again, the old man managed to escape with his fortune intact. This time, he refused to acknowledge his legal residence as Texas. In this way, he sought to invalidate his wife's heirs' claims.

Rice moved to New York, where he hired a secretary, Charles F. Jones. Still he was followed by the dread of someone's trying to seize his fortune. His obsession was so alarming that he cooked all of his own meals for fear of being poisoned—also, he didn't want to spend the money

for a cook. Meanwhile, his wife's heirs sent Albert T. Patrick, a lawyer of Houston, Texas, to New York to represent them in their case. Patrick and Jones soon became fast friends.

Three years later, in 1900, Patrick appeared at the bank with some of Rice's checks for certification. They were for large amounts. The clerk, aware of Rice's reputation, regarded them suspiciously, for he had never known the miser to part with so much money at once. His careful search revealed that one of the checks had a letter missing from the name. The diligent clerk called Rice's home only to be told by Jones that Rice wasn't in. At that moment, Rice lay dead in his own home.

The coroner's investigation revealed that Rice had eaten nine bananas that day, five fried and four raw. Was that the cause of his death? The police were inclined to think so, until the evidence discovered by the bank clerk was revealed. The signatures proved to be forged. Patrick and Jones were arrested, immediately. One of these men was the logical murderer of the miserly octogenarian. Finally, Patrick confessed that he had killed the old man. Patrick was found guilty of murder in the first degree. Jones went free.—*John Crail.*

THIS DEADLY WEAPON

open them up again. The police surgeon can fix me up. For God's sake, start driving!"

His voice was out of control. Sobbing, she jammed at the starter and rumbled the car away from the curb. He fumbled in her purse for a cigarette with trembling fingers. Somehow he lit it and dragged deeply.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm always like this afterwards. I'm all right while it's going on but afterward I get the shakes like hell."

Kevin's fingers gripped his leg above the knee. He could see her hand making furrows in the cloth but he couldn't feel anything. But they've hurt you, darling," she said. "I can't stand to see you like this. I love you so, Walter. I can't stand to see you hurt."

"I'm not so bad off," Walter James insisted. "They won't like me at the border, but I'm still in fair shape." He ran cautious fingertips over himself. "Let's see. Three cuts in the head. Most of them are above the hairline so they won't show much. This cheek's a little beat up. And I'll need some tape on these ribs."

He put his hand under his coat and felt his back. "I'll be glad when my spine comes to life. That son of a bitch kicked me square in this." He pulled out his hand; in it was a snub-barrelled pistol.

"You had a gun?" Kevin said. "Why didn't you use it?"

He considered. "I guess I would have if they'd really gotten rough."

CHAPTER XVI

"CAN HE talk now, doc?" asked Clapp.

(Continued from page 67)

By WARD MILLER

"Sure," said Stein. "All the stitches are in. Can't have him moving his mouth while I'm putting stitches in. Come back tomorrow, James, and I'll check them. We won't bandage it. Stitches'll come out in about a week."

"Thanks, Stein," said Walter James, sitting erect on the operating table. He had no clothes on.

"Okay," said Clapp, "what's the story?"

"Spine's all right," murmured Stein. "Can't do anything about the bruise. Little tape on this rib and I think we're done."

Felix came in with the powder blue suit. "I got some of it off with cold water. It'll do to go home in."

"Got a cigarette?" asked the slender man. "Used mine up on the way to Tijuana."

"Sure."

"Come on, James—let loose. What took you across the border?" insisted Clapp heavily.

Walter James swung his bare feet idly while the police medic worked deftly at his side. He sucked in smoke.

"You know damn well what took me down there," he said. "That phone call Gilbert made to Luz last night. Which brings up thing one. Don't mention Gilbert's tie-in with this mess in front of Kevin."

"Oh?"

"No. She's all innocent kid. She's not in it. And the Gilbert angle isn't solid yet."

"When you're in the department, James, you'll have something to say about how it's run."

The private detective winced as Stein pressed at the wide tape. "I just don't want you bungling around the

girl's feelings if you can avoid it. And you can avoid it."

"Okay, okay. Get dressed and let's go down to the office. We've got lots to go over."

Walter James began drawing his clothes on painfully. "I just got this suit," he noted sadly. "Another point. That daytime tail isn't as bright as the night man. He had his car parked the wrong way when I brought Kevin out of the college and he never did catch us."

Clapp grinned. "That's one on you. I told him that as long as the girl was with you to stand clear. He didn't try to follow you. Right now he's waiting around her house to pick her up there. You see, the Atlanta report came in this morning."

"I know," said Walter James.

"The Atlanta outfit gave you a damn good reference. They said you were a little bloody but ran the squarest private agency they'd ever seen." The big man squinted. "What do you mean, you knew the report was in?"

"Luz quoted it to me," he said flatly. "Figure that one out."

"But it's never left homicide!" said Felix.

"Then check your wire office. You've sprung a leak somewhere."

Clapp said slowly, "There isn't a crooked cop in San Diego."

Walter James slipped his coat on and shrugged. "I'm not telling you how to run your department. I'm just telling you what I know."

"I'll look into it," said Clapp, frowning. "I won't find that answer, but I'll look into it."

Walter James said, "Thanks again, Stein," and the three men went out into the hall. Kevin got up from the bench.

"Did it hurt, Walter?" She took his hands.

"No, redhead. Stein's a good man—

handy with a needle. I told you it wouldn't show."

She regarded his face quizzically. "Maybe not later but its pretty gruesome right now." She looked at Clapp. "May we go now? He really ought to get some rest."

"I'm afraid we have a few things to talk over, Miss Gilbert." He turned to Walter James. "There's a man in my office I want you to meet."

"I see," said the smaller man. "Will you read magazines for a while, Kevin? I'll try to make this quick."

"I can get a car and send her home," volunteered Felix.

Kevin shook her head and sat down on the bench. "I'll wait. You don't have to hurry, Walter."

WALTER JAMES went into the office first. The man who was sitting by Clapp's desk rose briskly to his feet. In front of his ears, bushy black hair had turned iron color. There were flecks of iron in his mustache and his face was all business.

"Mr. Maslar — Mr. James," said Clapp.

Walter James smiled and shook hands. "How do you do, Maslar. F.B.I.?"

Maslar nodded shortly. "I can see you're not at your best right now, James. But I thought we'd all better get together on this as soon as possible."

Clapp walked around his desk. "I called Maslar as soon as the wires got here this morning. It looks like you've uncovered something, son. Everybody sit down and get comfortable."

After the scraping of chair legs, Maslar said, "Clapp's briefed me on everything including Gilbert's call to Luz. It was lucky you overheard that number. That and the wires are the only reason I'm here."

Clapp spoke up. "Suppose you tell us of your fun this morning, James. Give him some cigarettes, Felix."

"Thanks," said Walter James. "Naturally, I checked the phone number and the name Steve about the same way you did. Esteban Luz owns the Devil's Bar in Tijuana. It's a fairly classy layout. He's known in his circle as Big Steve and he has a son, Little Steve Luz. The other man I met was named John Darmer. Luz introduced him as his executive manager."

The F.B.I. man nodded. "We know of all three. They aren't on my department's records as anything but potential. How about you, Clapp?"

"Same story. I know of them but they're clear here. Besides, they're out of my territory."

"I wish they were out of mine," said Maslar wryly. "This border stuff is dynamite. And complicated. Go on, James."

"Luz has had contact with Dr. Boone. He mentioned him as being big and healthy looking. That's as far as he went on the subject."

Clapp mused. "Then Dr. Boone does exist."

The slender man blew out smoke. "That's the way I felt. At long last, someone's actually seen him. Now maybe you'll believe I got a phone call in Atlanta."

The detective lifted his hands. "Hell, I believed you. If it wasn't for anonymous phone calls, we'd never get half our convictions."

"Anyway, Luz also knew of the Filipino, which wasn't played up much in the papers."

"What made him start getting rugged?" interrupted Felix.

"That was after I had called him on the XEGC deal." Walter James exchanged glances with Clapp. He leaned forward in his chair, fingers laced

tightly together, and stared at the floor. "This is the part I hate. Two nights ago Kevin—the Gilbert girl," he added for Maslar's benefit, "told me why she suspected her father was keeping Shasta Lynn. Gilbert, who is no chaser, goes out one night a week and recently Kevin caught him in a couple of lies about where. She got suspicious and, nosing around, found the old man had given Shasta Lynn that house in La Mesa as an outright gift plus some money every month. I don't know how much, but enough to dent his bank account. That's the reason Kevin was at the Grand Theater, Clapp. She wanted to take a look at Shasta."

"I get it," said the big man.

"Just get it straight. The poor kid doesn't know her father's got a finger in this goofball pie. She just happened to pick the night to go scouting that the Filipino was murdered. There was a chance in a million that she'd pick that night and sit next to him, but she did."

Felix grunted. "It never fails."

WALTER JAMES kept his eyes on the floor. "Of course, when I found that Shasta Lynn was "interested" in her buddy Madeline, that threw the Gilbert May-December passion out the nearest window. So the money seemed to be blackmail. Maybe the Filipino knew him and passed some information on to Shasta. I figured about the only way the Filipino would know him was by the dope angle. Maybe Gilbert was the man that Ferdy passed the stuff on to."

Maslar said soberly, "I'm glad to meet one private detective who uses the word maybe."

"When you're in the racket for cash, the long shots save time and money," Walter James said. "At any rate, that

might explain where Gilbert was one night a week—at the Grand Theater picking up the delivery from the Filipino. Last night I had Kevin let him know that I had been to see Shasta Lynn. That scared the old man into calling Luz. I was lucky enough to catch the number.”

Clapp interrupted. “You figure Luz as the boy who gets the marijuana across the border?”

“That’s it. He probably has trucks coming across to pick up American liquor and beer. It wouldn’t be hard. The border men can’t find everything, and they’re easier on the regular commercial traffic. I figure Luz gathered it in, Darmer brought it across to the Filipino, the Filipino delivered it to Gilbert and Gilbert sent it on to Atlanta.”

Clapp pursed his lips. “Fair enough.”

“Well, back to what got me this beating. Something Kevin said about her father always listening to the radio—to XEGC—gave me a wild hunch. So in front of Luz, I called the station and asked which specific day every week the Devil’s Bar radio advertisements were broadcast.” He paused. “And look at me now.”

“That was the answer?”

“That was one answer. When Luz broadcast his plugs, that was the tip-off for Gilbert to go to the Grand Theater and pick up a shipment.”

“I guess the radio would be safer than a lot of phone calls back and forth across the border,” said Felix. He looked at the slim man’s battered face. “Just who did the dirty work?” he asked softly.

“Luz’ son started working me over first with a knife butt. Then Darmer put in his two cents worth with aluminum knucks. He’s a sadist, junior grade. He wears heavy shoes just to kick the bejesus out of guys like me.”

Clapp rolled his tongue around

under his lips. “Just where was your gun all this time, James?”

“Did you want to see me killed? I left one gun in the car. I had a .32 strapped over my tailbone that they didn’t find, but I didn’t feel like using it. Darmer kicked it halfway through me. Gentlemen, if that gun had gone off, it would have been my end.”

THE roomful chuckled. “Well, except for my troubles getting back across the border with this face, that’s the story.”

Masler broke the short silence. He looked at Clapp. “My jurisdiction,” he said. “We’re coming in.”

“Okay,” said Clapp. “Looks like the only way I’ll ever get this Filipino killing off the books.

“I’ll check with consul and call Mexico City. It shouldn’t take more than twenty-four hours until the Mexican police can close in on the Luz bunch.” He sighed. “And then afterward. You should see the paper work involved. This border stuff is dynamite.”

“Don’t forget this case in my jurisdiction, too,” said Walter James. “Luz is only part of the setup. The man I want to see is Dr. Boone. You know my reasons.”

Clapp pursed his lips. “Speaking of doctors—Boniface is clear. So is Rockwell. At least as far as our records go.”

Walter James scowled at the floor. “Maybe they don’t fit into this case at all. I braced Major Rockwell last night.”

“And?”

“No answer.”

“How about Boniface’s card in the Filipino’s pocket?”

“That’s one of those things that always screws you up on a case like this.” Walter James shrugged slim

shoulders. "Solez was a pretty sharp operator for a brown boy. Maybe he was selling marijuana on the side to Boniface."

Masler looked at Clapp. "Why don't you pick them off?"

Walter James said quickly, before the big man could reply, "You couldn't hold them."

"No," agreed Clapp heavily, "we couldn't hold them. Not yet, anyway."

Masler frowned. "But if one of them is Dr. Boone—"

"Let them run," Walter James said softly. "Give them plenty of rope. Dr. Boone isn't going to get away."

Clapp fished in the drawer for his pipe. "He's human like the rest of us. His luck can't last."

"Dr. Boone's actions so far indicate something more than just luck," Masler said.

"No argument," agreed Clapp. "But nobody's plan ever worked perfectly. It's the human element, Maslar. Eventually, something that Dr. Boone hasn't planned for will drop him right in our arms."

"The unknown factor," smiled Walter James. "Let X equal the unknown."

Clapp struck a match and puffed at his pipe noisily. "Right. In the meantime, we got to go ahead and try to stir up that unknown factor."

"Speaking of the human element," Walter James said and eyed Clapp soberly, "I know this is a touchy subject, Clapp, but I want to warn Maslar."

"Warn me?"

He turned to the F.B.I. man. "It won't be as stringent as the one Luz gave me to stay away from the cops and the Gilbert house. It's this: Luz knew the Atlanta report was in this morning."

Maslar caught Clapp's eyes. "I'll

check," said the big man. "I don't think Luz will get away. It won't go out of this office except with you. God, I hate to think of a stool in my own outfit!"

"I'm sorry," said Maslar. "I know the feeling."

WALTER JAMES started a new cigarette and flicked the match in the wastebasket. "I know damn well all this activity isn't on my say-so," he commented. "What was in the Atlanta wire?"

Clapp smiled grimly. "The Atlanta and Denver wires."

"Then there was something in Denver?"

"Was is right."

"Tell me all. This thing is really beginning to open up."

Clapp grinned. "The East has been popping even after you left it, James. Take Denver. On the seventeenth of September, the Monday before you got here, a man was strangled and burned. A druggist on Curtis Street named Melvin Emig. He also had a lot of other names. The Denver authorities didn't know he had a record until he showed up dead. He was strangled with a wire garrote and covered with cleaning fluid. Then somebody touched a match to him and walked off.

"The connection?"

"Not much of his drug store was burned. In the back room he had been wrapping our brand of marijuana for shipment to a post office in Atlanta. He was shipping it as reducing powder."

Maslar broke in. "This Emig seems to have been some sort of relay along the dope route to the East. San Diego to Denver to Atlanta. It looks like the boys at each end didn't want to know each other. And undoubtedly Emig didn't know anything but ad-

dresses."

"Didn't he send to a name in Atlanta?" Walter James leaned forward.

"Yes," said Clapp. "The post office box he was addressing the stuff to belonged to Dr. Elliott Boone."

The slender man sat back and stretched his arms. "Well, well, well."

"That's not the payoff. Denver, of course, got in touch with Atlanta. Atlanta had already opened Dr. Boone's box—they ran onto it the day after you left. They checked the post office people on who had rented the box but didn't learn anything. It had been rented several years ago and was paid semiannually in advance by mailed cash. The guy who rented it out was still working there but he couldn't remember that far back. One girl was sort of sure that once she saw a kind of big man call on the box, but that's all. They remember putting packages in it about once a week."

Maslar said, "It all fits together beautifully. This particular dope ring is all shot to hell. We want to make sure we round up all the participants, of course, but as an organization it's out of business. We also want the top man—presumably Dr. Boone. The question in my mind is this: are all these marijuana runners being liquidated by another ring? Or is Dr. Boone closing up his organization the safe way?"

Walter James ground a pale fist against his palm. "The one man who can enlighten us is Dr. Boone. Maybe he's on the run himself if this other ring you mentioned exists. In that case, why was my partner killed?"

"He might have had something on both rival rings," said Maslar. "But we haven't had the slightest hint of a second weed outfit so far."

"It's my guess that Hal was getting too damn close to Boone himself," said

the slight man. "I vote for the ring we got. Or, at least, are getting."

"Damn, you got me off the subject," interjected Clapp. "What I'm trying to get around to is this: when the Atlanta cops opened Dr. Boone's box there wasn't any dope in it. There was just a gun—the .45 that killed your partner."

Walter James slammed to his feet. "The registry?" he asked.

"No registry. No prints. It's just another automatic the Army reported missing some years back. There must be a million of them floating around the country."

"Oh."

"I can guess how you feel about your partner, James. I wish we had more for you. But things are looking up."

"Atlanta have anything to say about Ethel?"

Clapp shook his heavy head. "They're still looking and checking bodies. Do you think she's dead?"

"I haven't any idea. If she's hiding out—why I don't know—she's had plenty of time to get in touch with me."

MASLAR rubbed the gray hair on his temple, pushing the side of his face into worried wrinkles. "There are only three women really involved in this case so far, James. Miss Gilbert, Shasta Lynn and the missing Ethel Lantz. I'm thinking of the attack on you last Saturday night where face powder was found on the weapon. Miss Gilbert was shot at along with you. Shasta Lynn has no alibi, presumably having started home. Ethel Lantz has no alibi, presumably being dead. Can we rule out Ethel Lantz conclusively?"

Walter James looked at him steadily. "Yes. If Ethel is alive, I don't know why she'd be shooting at me. Or Kevin."

"Which leaves woman or women unknown," said Clapp. "And our girl Shasta."

Walter James smiled without humor. "I thought I had that end closed off," he said. "But she keeps popping up."

"Yes, she does," agreed Clapp. "Like the Gilbert family."

Walter James' lips tightened, then relaxed. "Maybe I'm just getting used to that dull knife of yours, Clapp. If I had my way, old man Gilbert would never get in this picture because I don't want his daughter hurt. But I can't have my way because Hal got his belly blown out. Gilbert didn't do that, but it looks like he did business with the man who hired the gun. So he gets in the picture come what may. There's a code—if your partner's gunned out, it's your baby to find the killer. Like cop killings."

Maslar said, "Very commendable, James. Just remember you have no official status except as a pretty damn material witness. As Clapp says, steer clear of any legal troubles. Law is law, and as government employees we can't push it too far."

"Just a light shove now and then," said Felix.

"I don't think I'll need it," smiled the slim detective. "I'm going to visit Mr. Gilbert tomorrow. You won't haul him in for questioning until you've shut down the Devil's Bar outfit. He might tip off Luz himself—if Luz has a man in this headquarters. I wouldn't advise even putting a tail on him until you have Luz. After all, our good neighbor has at least seen Dr. Boone. That's more than we can prove for Gilbert."

"We can reason, too," answered Clapp sourly. "It's pretty obvious we can let Gilbert ride for twenty-four hours."

"Twenty-four will about do it,"

agreed Maslar. "Meeting's adjourned as far as I'm concerned, gentlemen. I imagine James would like to go home and lick his wounds."

"Keep in touch with us, James," said the big man, as they all rose. "And avoid dangerous entanglements. I'll keep a guard on the Gilbert girl when she's not with you. I'll trust you to take good care of her." He grinned.

Walter James' voice was bitter. "Yes. I'm proud of the way I've taken care of her interests at our meeting today. I'll collect my thirty pieces of silver on the way out."

CHAPTER XVII

"NO. THIS coffee will be plenty, red-head."

"Does your stomach hurt much?"

"Not much. But I'm not hungry."

The cool night began to dwell over the red neon drive-in. Scattered traffic purred along the Causeway, returning to the city from Ocean Beach, Mission Beach and La Jolla. Far away by the ocean, the serpentine lights of the roller coaster gleamed.

Kevin pushed her leg against his. Between mouthfuls of bread and barbecued pork, she said, "It's nice being alone with you here. I mean, all these other people are shut up in their own cars. It's almost like being alone. But I wish we'd go home and let you get some rest, Walter."

He flicked his eyes across the rear view mirror. "I'm afraid we can't rest for a while."

She lowered her voice. "Why not? You have to!"

"Put on some lipstick," suggested Walter James, "and while you're looking in your mirror, catch that black convertible on our side of the street half a block back."

"Who is it?" she asked, running her

hand around in her purse. She found the mirror.

"Tweedle-dee and Tweedle-dum, the boys who pounded on me. They warned me not to go near the cops. I didn't think they'd pick me up so quick."

"I see them—two men. I can't see what they look like."

"I know what they look like."

Kevin studied the mirror. "I do need lipstick."

Walter James flicked the headlights. The carhop scowled and ambled over, pulling out the bill. "Dollar twenty-eight," she said.

The slender man tossed down a bill and a coin. The carhop unfastened the tray from the steering wheel. Kevin handed her tray across the car. The carhop swung her hips back to the stool.

Kevin said in a small voice, "What do those men want?"

"Scared?"

"Uh-huh." She didn't look at him. "I guess I shouldn't be after all that's happened, but—uh-huh."

Walter James grinned at her. "Where's that old frontier spirit? The West is dead, podner."

The girl tried a weak smile. "I guess you're the last of the vigilantes, sweetheart."

"Don't be scared," he said. "I'll take care of you." He started the car and pulled out into the Causeway, switching on the headlights when they had passed the intersection. Kevin looked back and watched the convertible slide away from the curb.

"Where to now?" she asked.

"Hither hence, whither whence? We'll try to shake them. I didn't mean to get you mixed up in this, redhead. I didn't think they'd pick me up till I got to my apartment."

She put her head to one side. "What makes you think that I was going to

leave you when we reached your apartment?"

"What's out this way?" he asked.

She laughed and pressed his sleeve. "All right. Ignore me. We're passing through Ocean Beach, Walter. After we cross the bridge up ahead we'll be on a straight divided road which runs parallel with the beach. It passes through New Mission Beach—that's the roller coaster and the fun zone—then Old Mission Beach and Pacific Beach."

"Crowded?"

"Fairly so. After that we hit the road to La Jolla. I don't know how that will be. What do you want?"

"A narrow curved road without much traffic. And sudden side roads."

"There's the hills back of La Jolla—a road running up to 101. It's got a couple of side roads into gullies. It's about as curved as they come around here."

"Tell me when, redhead. After the traffic thins out, I'll pick up speed. Give me a little warning."

SHE PRESSED her liteness close to him and shivered. "I'm not scared any more, Walter. This is exciting."

Walter James gave her a quick smile. "I guess we like the same things."

"We're different," Kevin said, stroking the cloth over his upper arm. "Most people say that about riding merry-go-rounds or walking in the rain. I think it's silly to walk in the rain. Will they shoot us, Walter?"

"Not now. Maybe not at all if we figure this right."

"Funny—" she began. "No, it's not so funny. I'm not afraid at all now—just keyed up. It's because you're here. I know our side will win. You always win, don't you, Walter?"

"I haven't picked a loser yet," he said soberly.

The Buick bounced over old street-car tracks and they were out of Pacific Beach. They spun left beneath an underpass onto the scarcely lighted boulevard that led to La Jolla. The girl jerked his cuff.

"When," she announced. "To the right. Two streets ahead."

Walter James swept off the headlights. "How soon does it begin to curve?"

"When we reach the hills. It doesn't curve much, but it's the best I can do. There are a couple of side roads."

The Buick was a dark blob speeding up the hill. To the right was the scarred canyon wall, sliced away to make a shelf for the two-lane road. To the left was a sagebrush covered drop-off that grew steeper as they climbed.

"Sure we won't meet anybody?"

"No, I'm not sure. Are they still following us?"

"If they've got a brain in their heads. I hope we still have a good lead."

"Here's one road," Kevin said excitedly. "The next one's around this curve. I think it's better."

He squealed the car around the bend with all his weight on the brake pedal. The canyon was a black yawn beneath them. His hand hit the gear shift rod, knocking it into reverse. Full gas sent the Buick bumping backwards into a slot in the mutilated canyon wall.

Fifty feet off the road, with the car's nose pointing at the main highway, he stopped. The motor idled and frogs began chirruping again.

Kevin whispered, "I used to come up here to neck."

"Get out," Walter James commanded swiftly. "Hide in the brush and stay there till I call you. Take this. Don't touch the trigger until you plan to use it. Wait till somebody's within ten feet of you, then just point it—like you would your finger."

He pressed the short coldness of the .32 into her hand. "Yes, Walter." Kevin scrambled out of the car into the close darkness. There was a scraping of branches and then stillness. The frogs had stopped.

The slender man opened the glove compartment and took two .38's out. Laying them on the seat beside him, he buttoned his coat, except the bottom button. The lapels he folded over his white shirt front. One gun was tucked under his belt, the butt outside his coat. He pushed the other weapon under him and sat on it. His slender hand moved through the darkness and pushed the gear shift into second.

AT THE sound of a speeding motor, Walter James clicked the Buick's headlights on and off swiftly. The other motor slowed. He strained his eyes at the narrow patch of road fifty feet away. A low blob crept onto it and stopped—the black convertible.

A smile of savage triumph carved itself across the slight detective's lean face. Inside the car three shapes were barely visible—two spheres that were heads and a thin stick that was a rifle barrel. Walter James stomped on the gas and let the clutch free.

The two spheres jerked and the door toward him began to open hurridely as the Buick hurtled toward the main road. As his front wheels hit the pavement, Walter James slammed one foot on the brake pedal and jerked the emergency back. The big car screamed in agony across the two lane road.

It looked like Little Steve trying to get out the convertible door. He was moving in slow motion. Darmer was a frozen statue behind the wheel of the smaller car.

The hills echoed the crash of metal as the Buick hit the convertible broadside. For a sickening eternity, the

bumper of one car caught under the running board of the other. Then the massive shapes wrenched apart and one rolled over the lip of the road into the canyon darkness. Hideous unrhythmical noises spewed up as the convertible bounced crazily out of sight.

Walter James rolled out of the Buick onto the road. Metal gleamed from either fist as he wormed to the edge of the road and looked over. There was nothing; he was alone with black bush-shapes and the dead night.

Kevin came running and stumbling out of the side road. Walter James rose and brushed off the front of his suit. He caught her as she came up to him.

"No use looking. There's nothing to see."

She threw her arms around him and clung to his body. After a briefness, he pushed her away and took the weapon that hung loosely in her hand. All three guns bounced softly onto the car seat.

"I don't feel anything," her whisper came to him. "It was too easy—too quick. Is it always like that?"

"It's always like that," he said.

She stood with her elbows pressed into the sides. "Kiss me, Walter! Kiss me now!"

He pulled her against him and their trembling merged into one universal hammer beat. Their mouths fought fiercely; he could feel teeth cutting against his lip.

"Don't ever leave me, Walter. I love you. Don't ever leave me!"

CHAPTER XVIII

SOMEBODY knocked at the door.

Walter James, cradled in a big chair, watched the smoke corkscrew up from his cigarette. He was wearing a deep blue dressing gown over patterned pajamas. The ash stand by the

chair was a stew of soft ashes and ground out butts.

The knock sounded again. He glanced at the electric clock on the desk. Nine. Nine o'clock the morning after. Nine o'clock, Wednesday, the twenty-seventh of September. He punched out the cigarette and walked wearily to the door.

A boy was standing outside, about to knock again. He had thin hawkish features and big eyes; he couldn't have been much over twenty. Walter James looked at him blankly for a moment before he recognized Bob Newcomb.

He said frostily, "What do you want?"

Newcomb's big eyes were surprised and caught by the ragged stitched wounds on the smaller man's head. He blinked and remembered. "I've come for Laura."

Walter James looked him up and down. "What makes you think she would be here?" The boy stepped into the apartment. "I didn't invite you in. I asked what makes you think she would be here?"

The boy glanced around wildly. Walter James noticed his eyes were tired—more tired than his own felt. "I know she's here!" he blurted. "Laura didn't come home last night. You brought her here last night and kept her here!"

The slender man's eyes didn't feel worn any longer. They were alive and filled with blue ice. "You'd better go sonny. Take your dirty adolescent mind back to school and peddle your paper."

"I'm not going unless I take Laura with me." His voice bounced around, uncontrolled. He was wearing a sport coat and a sport shirt; open-necked, it revealed every gulp and made his smooth throat childish. "Laura's my girl. You had no right to bring her here. What have you done with her?"

Walter James said between his teeth, "Get out!"

The boy's voice fell into half-pleading. "Mr. James, Laura's my girl. She's a nice girl. I don't know what you told her, but you had no right to take advantage of her."

"Advantage!" Walter James laughed without mirth. "Is that what you learned in school? Don't you know any better words? I suppose you think I slept with her last night!"

The boy clenched his fists, his face burning. "You can't talk about Laura like that!"

The slender man laughed scornfully. "Beat it, sonny. Go read a dictionary."

The youngster brought his fists up in front of him and advanced. "I'm taking Laura home and you can't stop me! She's just a girl and—and—you're an old man!"

Walter James hit him in the stomach and the boy bent over, retching. The back of the same fist came up under his chin and he collapsed on the rug. Walter James looked down at him grimly.

The boy was on his hands and knees when Kevin walked in from the bedroom. Her bare feet poised unsteadily on the nap of the rug. Little sleep creases surrounded her surprised eyes and her copper hair tangled about her face abandonedly. She wore a flesh-colored slip over her naked girl's body.

She put her puzzled face to one side and said, "Bob!"

Newcomb looked up at her silently, painstricken. Runaway tears gleamed on his cheeks.

"You've seen what you came to see," said Walter James. "Now get out of here!"

"Walter," the girl said reprovingly. She padded forward and took Newcomb's arm, helping him clumsily to his feet. "Bob, I'm so awfully sorry that

this had to happen. You shouldn't have come. You had no right to."

Newcomb caught at her hand. "Laura—"

KEVIN stepped back a pace, evading his grasp. "No, Bob, don't. What I do is my own business. I'm sorry that I've hurt you—but I love Walter and I want to be with him."

The boy looked incredulously at Walter James. "Love?" he said hoarsely.

"Yes. You'd better go, Bob. Please don't feel too badly."

Newcomb blinked nervously, undecidedly. He looked at the girl's serious face, at the rustbrown eyes sobered by deep emotion. Then he turned and walked out down the hall without lifting his feet very high. The sound of his footsteps going down the stairs had completely died away before Kevin sighed and closed the door.

She said, without looking at him, "I'm sorry, Walter." She crossed to the window and stood looking out.

Walter James said softly, "Kevin." The girl turned and looked at him across the room. Her eyes mirrored the old unhappiness.

"Yes, Walter?"

"Has this—spoiled it for you?"

She gave a soft little cry and came running forward to throw herself into his arms and hold him tight. "Oh, Walter, Walter, of course not! Nothing could spoil you for me."

Walter James sat down, sagging into the chair. The girl slipped onto his lap, seeped her warmth against him. She put her lips close to the scars above his ear.

"I was afraid you'd feel differently," she whispered. "Bob has nothing to do with us. There's just the two of us. We can't be touched by other people unless we want to be."

He put his arms around her youthfulness. "I don't deserve you, redhead. But I'm going to try to keep you just the same."

"You deserve so much more than just me," she said softly. "But please be satisfied with me because that's all I want."

CHAPTER XIX

SHE didn't want to go out to the college at all, but he insisted. At eleven o'clock she was standing on the curb in front of the college bookstore, waving goodbye to the Buick as it drove off.

Fifteen minutes later, Walter James walked into the office at 45th Street and El Cajon. Gilbert had watched him drive up. As the screen door banged, the old man winced and turned the desk radio lower.

"I don't know what you have to tell me, Mr. James," he said wearily. "I know my daughter didn't come home last night. That's all."

The lines in his face were deeper in the daytime. Walter James decided they had nothing to do with character; they were simply the result of being worried for years.

"Your daughter is in no danger, Mr. Gilbert," he said. "I can guarantee that for a while."

Gilbert shuffled some forms on his desk with brown corrugated hands. "Danger? There's no way to escape it. There's no point in trying. It's dangerous to cross the street or to eat things out of tin cans."

"The odds are with Kevin. I'm on her side." The slight man fitted himself into the leather chair for clients.

"Kevin." Gilbert let out a quick breath. "That was her mother's idea. No, I never had any particular plans for Laura—I just wanted her to be

happy. I wanted to be a real father to her, but she wasn't my idea of a daughter. Her moodiness, her romanticism—I don't know where she gets them. I've never had any longing for adventure the way she sees it. Things are unstable enough as they are. All I've ever wanted was security."

"Kevin doesn't want security," said Walter James.

"No, she never has," said the old man. "She's not old enough to realize how valuable it is. She doesn't know what she wants."

"Affection."

Gilbert twisted his old mouth and gleamed his eyes at Walter James. "It's hard to really like what you don't understand. I've given her everything I could. I've done my best for what seems like a long time. What can you offer her, Mr. James?"

The slight man lit a cigarette. After the match died, he flung it straight down with all his might into the wastebasket by the desk. "Nothing," he said. "The same thing you've given her."

"I see you're getting old, too. Anybody with any sense gets bitter as they grow old. The whole thing's so insecure, so planless. I've rented houses to people through two wars now—that's a long time. There's been couples who rented them clandestinely — thought they'd be happy that way. And there's been couples starting marriages together who couldn't afford what they wanted and couldn't be happy in a thirty dollar a month duplex. None of them have been happy. Where's the plan?"

Walter James clasped his hands together tightly. "I didn't drive down here to discuss philosophy. I haven't the time to search out a pattern for living."

Gilbert smiled weakly. "I see you're

not old enough. You'll find time later on. Later on."

"As far as I'm concerned, Kevin is a free agent. If she wants to walk in my direction, nothing is going to stop her. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Don't expect an outraged father, Mr. James. I'm not perturbed at whatever arises between you and Laura. Perhaps I was at first because I didn't expect her to be courted by an older man. But events have changed that. It doesn't matter now."

WALTER JAMES contemplated the tips of his fingers. "You keep missing the point. Maybe the God you're worrying about doesn't have a plan, but I have. Nothing is going to interfere with Kevin and whatever she wants. Particularly the arrest of her father."

"Do you come from the police?"

"My connection with the police is as strong as the help they can give me. In Atlanta I'm a private detective. I'm after a man who killed a friend of mine. I'm not interested in upholding the law."

"My daughter told me about your partner. I can't give you any help there."

"You know of Dr. Elliott Boone?"

"I've never heard the name. Is he the man you're after?"

The radio began a rumba undertone. A slender hand turned the knob and plunged the office into silence.

"He's the man I'm after. I wasn't expecting help from you. I didn't think you would know Dr. Boone. You did know the Filipino. You know Shasta Lynn."

The old man shrugged tired shoulders. "I've been waiting for the police for some time."

Walter James sprang to his feet. "Damn it! I don't want you to wait

for the police. You—I don't care if you dry up in jail and blow out through the bars. But Kevin deserves better."

Gilbert shook his head slowly. "There's no use to fight, Mr. James. I made my bid for security and I failed. I knew I had failed after the Filipino talked to Miss Lynn."

"That tramp will keep her mouth shut or have it shut for her. The Filipino's dead. Melvin Emig has been dead for some time. Little Steve and Darmer—well, they ran into a little trouble last night. Esteban Luz will be taken in by the Mexican police this afternoon."

"Then everyone is gone but me. It seems inexorable, doesn't it?"

"Don't go by appearances," the smaller man warned. "If everybody's gone, there are no witnesses. The police know very little about you. Esteban Luz knows your name but he's not likely to talk. He will be expecting help from you after he is taken in—help that will never come. By the time he decides he's been double-crossed you will be gone and the Mexican police will decide it's too difficult to reopen the case."

"Sit down, Mr. James," said Gilbert. He switched the radio on and drummed his fingers on the desk. After a while he said, "What is the possibility?"

"Very good to excellent."

A paunchy couple stopped on the sidewalk outside and peered indecisively.

"House hunters," said Gilbert. "We'd better make an appointment to meet somewhere later this afternoon. I don't suppose I can lose any ground through discussion."

CHAPTER XX

"I'VE only been here once before in my whole life," Kevin said, im-

pressed. "What made you think of bringing me here?"

She moved her face from side to side, trying to absorb the entire scope of Sunset House at one wide glance—the sweeping beamed ceiling, the ornate crystal chandeliers, the scores of lamplit white-clothed tables, the high arched windows that allowed the dining room to stretch to the horizon and its half-circle sun that was set there like a ruby. She sucked in her breath ecstatically. "I guess I can't get it all in at once. What made you think of bringing me here? It's simply wonderful."

"Something somebody said, I guess." The slender man smiled at her over a liquor glass. "Is there anywhere you'd rather be?"

"No!" she said. "There's no nicer place in San Diego. It's been here for ages—since 1870 or around in there. I didn't realize people had such wonderful taste then."

"They certainly went in for size," Walter James admitted. "Full?"

Kevin laughed into her drink. "As always. Aren't you proud of me—that I don't get fat?" She stretched luxuriously. "Let's go out on the balcony. Fresh air and then a drink, then more fresh air, then another drink—"

He laughed. "Ad infinitum. Or what's Latin for 'until the bar closes'?"

They walked along the plate glass wall to the nearest arch and stepped out into the assembling dusk. Kevin skipped over to the stone balustrade.

"Look, Walter! The sun's nearly gone." He came up beside her and slipped his hand between her arm and her body. "Sunsets are sort of sad," she mused.

"He always comes back."

"But it seems so final. It's only a very little sun and the Pacific's such a big ocean."

"Every time the sun sets in the

ocean I expect to see steam come up."

She squeezed his hand with her arm. They leaned on the stone rail in silent reverence. To the left was the etched suddenness of the Point Loma hills; everywhere else was sheet metal ocean. Far below, the surf boiled among rock clusters and chewed at the cliffs with thundering rage.

"Sunset Cliffs," she murmured. "They've looked at sunsets so long they've turned red themselves." She looked down, fascinated by the white festoons of surf. "It's a long way down."

"Cigarette?"

"Yes, thanks." She concentrated on his lighting it. "Oh. I nearly forgot. Give me the package and look the other way a minute."

He obeyed and she kept talking. "We must come out here in the afternoon sometime. Between us and the ocean there's lots of curlicue paths with little caves and things like that. They lead clear down to the rocks. You'd like it. We'd be alone the whole time because the paths turn and twist every yard or so. It's safe because it's wide, but you can never see anybody near you. It's like being all alone in the world. You'd have your chance to push me over if I talked too much. There—you can turn around now."

Walter James turned back and she held out her hand. In it was an ebony black case with a single band of silver running around the middle. She pressed the side and it snapped open to reveal toothy rows of cigarettes. "Have one, sir," she softly invited.

"Not yet." He tilted up her chin and kissed her gently on the cheek. "Thank you very much, redhead," he said.

"It isn't much. It isn't nearly enough." Her voice rushed out. "But you needed one and I got tired of smoking crushed cigarettes and I

wanted you to have something I'd given you. Wasn't that silly?"

HER piquant face was close in the soft blue gloom. "No. It's beautiful. It's as beautiful as you are. I'll always carry it—like it was your glove in my helmet."

She nestled close to him, happily. "I just wanted you to have something I'd given you."

"Now I have you and a cigarette case," he told her. "It's becoming a very full life."

"You'll always have me," she murmured. "I'll never get lost. Oh, Walter, I didn't want to go out to that silly college today. I just wanted to stay near you. It was awful out there. Then I came home tonight and Dad wasn't home. Not that he's so much company, but the house seemed so empty. I live in the emptiest house in town. But when you drove up tonight, everything was all right again." She shivered and rubbed her hand across his back. "Tell me that you love me."

"I love you."

"See!" she smiled. "Everything's all right."

"I just drove around most of the day myself. I didn't go near the apartment, except tonight to change clothes, for fear Clapp would get in touch with me. I was afraid he'd found those two bodies in that car and would want to talk to me. And after last night I didn't want to think about anything but you."

"You're sweet," she said. "I'd completely forgotten about those two men. It's funny how many different lives there are, going so many different ways. Yesterday there were those two men. They had lunch and talked about a lot of different things—and today they don't exist. And probably back in San Diego somewhere your Dr. Boone is thinking about what a wonderful din-

ner he has had and not even thinking about you at all."

Walter James laughed curtly. "He must think about me every waking moment or he wouldn't have stayed out of my reach so long."

"I'm sorry, darling."

"Do you want to go in and have another drink?"

She shook her head. "No. Let's go home and just be together. That would make me happiest."

"Do you have that feeling, too? That life's moving too fast?"

"I guess that's the way I feel. I'm afraid something's going to slip away from me. Let's go home, Walter."

His hand was on her arm as they walked out to the parking lot. She started slightly at a momentary pressure and looked around. He was staring at the back of a gleaming Pontiac, just disappearing down the curving road toward Ocean Beach.

"What is it, Walter?"

His eyes were gleaming oddly. "Nothing. It just seemed to me that maybe that was Dr. Boniface driving that car."

"Oh!" She peered after the car excitedly. "That's the man on the card, isn't it, Walter?"

He said softly, "Dr. Everett Boniface—Dr. Elliott Boone. It probably doesn't mean a thing." He smiled at her worried expression. "After all, red-head, he has as much right here as we have. And maybe I was wrong."

They drove from Point Loma slowly, Kevin pressing her head against his shoulder. After the car was garaged for the night, they walked hand in hand up the flight of stairs to the second floor apartments. Kevin still had one foot on the last step when his hand stopped her.

"Just a minute," he said quickly.

"What's wrong?"

SHE hadn't seen his hand move but all of a sudden there was a gun in it. Walter James glanced around the hall. Three apartment doors, a linen closet door, a window overlooking Fifth Street through a fire escape, a window that looked out the back of the building into nothinness.

"What's wrong, Walter?"

"I didn't leave my light burning when I left."

"Is there somebody in your room?" She found she was whispering.

"Maybe. Or maybe I'm supposed to think there's somebody waiting for me or that I forgot to turn off the light. But that windowshade at the back end of the hall has never been up that high before." His free hand moved across the switch and the hall light went off.

"I saw this happen once in Atlanta," he said. "A man was silhouetted against the light from his room as he opened the door. A man in the house across the street shot him. He was a beautiful target."

"What are we going to do?"

"Here's my key." He pressed it into her moist palm. "When I get to the window, go to my door, lie down on the floor while you unlock it. Open it wide in a hurry. Whoever's waiting down there has probably been straining to see that square of light so long that they'll fire at anything. But for God's sake, keep down!"

"Yes, Walter."

He slipped silently down the darkened hall to crouch by the window. A second later, Kevin crossed to his door and punched the key into the lock. Then she lay down on the hall carpet and reached her hand up to the knob. A rectangle of light leaped into the hall as the door swung open.

There was a hyphenated explosion. The back window was a shower of glass on Walter James. A chip of plaster and

a sifting of dust fell on Kevin's face where she lay on the hall floor.

"Walter!" she whispered.

"Roll inside and switch off the light," he commanded. He joined her in the dark and shut the door behind them. She reached out for the reassuring solidity of his body but he was over by the window, looking out.

"They're gone," he said in a moment. "Show's over." The normal tones of his voice seemed to echo in the confines of the shadowy room.

She ran over to him and looked out the window. "Who was it?"

"Somebody about there," he indicated with the gun. Across the alley was a board fence enclosing a herd of used cars. It was a dim jumble of faintly gleaming bubbles: automobile tops and fenders. "I fired right after they did but I don't think I hit much besides that fence in this light."

She coiled her arms around him tightly. "I'm glad you never get killed," she murmured.

He laughed. "That's a sweet thought. At least it pretty well settles who's getting shot at around here—you or me. They'd hardly lay an ambush for you at my apartment."

She giggled nervously. "Maybe they understand me better than you do," she whispered.

He sat down on the floor and pulled her down beside him. "Let's be relaxing when the reaction sets in."

She cuddled herself close to his body. "Aren't you going to turn on your lights, Mr. James?"

He kissed her over one eyebrow. "If the landlady knows I'm home, we'll have a couple of squad cars driving around in here. If we lay low, the cops will probably decide it's some wild kid with a .22 and eventually go away."

"Who do you think it was, Walter?"

There was a silence of consideration.

"I don't know," he said finally. "Maybe Dr. Boone. Maybe a friend of his. We'll have Clapp's men check tomorrow and see who's been prowling around these apartments."

"It's getting too close," she whispered. "I'm worried."

"Don't be," he said. He stroked the length of her body. "Don't think about that now."

After a soft while, she spoke. "I won't, darling. When we're like this, I can't think of anything but you." She trembled closer to him. "This—this feeling between us—it's like the ocean tonight. It beats and surges and never seems to stop, Walter darling."

Dark miles away, at the foot of Sunset Cliffs, the surf beat and roared and frothed over a flaccid body that lodged between two jealous rocks.

CHAPTER XXI

THE telephone kept ringing.

Walter James flipped on the bedlamp, worried his wristwatch out from under the pillow and looked at the time. It was fifteen minutes past three.

The strident bell notes sliced through the early morning stillness with mechanical regularity. Kevin shifted uneasily in her sleep. He stretched his bare feet down to the cool rug and padded into the other room, feeling his way to the invisible instrument.

"Hello?"

"James? This is Clapp. You got the Gilbert girl there?"

"I don't see that it's any of your damn business!"

The receiver voice rasped irritably. "Listen, James, this is no time to play. I sent out to her house and she wasn't there. Some kid named Newcomb was mooning around the front porch and

said she hadn't come home tonight and that she was probably with you. If you got her or know where she is, get her down here right away."

"What's up?"

"She's got a body to identify. The papers on it say it's old man Gilbert."

"Dead? How?"

"We'll talk it over down here. Don't break it to the girl until we're sure. For God's sake, James, if she's there, bring her down right away!"

"Twenty minutes," said the slender man and hung up. He stood indecisively for a moment before he went back into the bedroom. Kevin was a spray of copper hair, a bare shoulder and mounded blankets. He shook her by the shoulder gently.

"Kevin."

"Mmmm?" She rolled over on her back without opening her eyes. He shook her again and she blinked awake.

"What is it, Walter?"

"Get up and get dressed. We have to go down to the police station. Are you awake?"

She sat up squinting. "It's still dark, isn't it?"

"Get dressed. We have to go right away. Are you wide awake now?"

"Yes, I'm awake, Walter."

"Listen. We're not sure yet, but Clapp wants you to take a look at a body. It may be your father."

She shook her head. "I don't understand."

"Clapp wants you to identify a body if you can. Your father may be dead."

Her face began to be nothing but white skin and shadows. She put out both hands and held on to his arms. "He can't be, Walter. He just can't be!" Her voice was neither frightened nor sad, only puzzled.

"You're right," he said. "Clapp may have made a mistake. It may not be your father. But we have to go down

town and see. There's no easy way to tell you. We have to go see."

"But it can't be!"

Walter James unfastened her hands gently. "Get dressed, redhead."

They drove through deserted streets to the foot of Market Street. Only occasional black and white prowling cars or gleaming taxis cruised across their path. As they walked across the police headquarters parking lot, the whistle of the last Coronado ferry moaned through the night.

CLAPP rose clumsily when they entered his office. At the corners of his eyes were patterned tracings of blood.

"I'm sorry about this, Miss Gilbert. But we have to be sure."

"I understand. Walter explained to me."

"Do you feel all right?"

"Yes. I'm all right. I'd like to get it over with."

"This way." The big man led them down the hall past the medical examiner's office to an unmarked door. Walter James stood close to her as they entered.

Stein nodded as they came into the peaceful room. The corners were lost to the shadows, but in the center one low hung light beamed unmercifully. Beneath it was an unmoving sheet-covered form on a wheeled table. Under the table were small puddles of water.

"Okay, Stein," said Clapp.

The medic folded the sheet back.

"Is this your father, Miss Gilbert?"

The old man's eyes were closed to the punishing light. His forehead was bruised and damp hair clung there protectively. But the lines in his face were not so deep now.

The men could barely hear Kevin's voice. "Yes. That's my father."

Stein replaced the sheet and looked at the big man questioningly. Clapp cleared his throat.

"We'd like to perform an autopsy, Miss Gilbert. Is that all right with you?"

"I guess so," she said. "I don't know." She shook her head back and forth. "How did it happen?"

Walter James gripped her arm. "Let's go back to the office."

Clapp nodded to Stein as they went out. In his office, he cleared his throat again.

"You know how sorry I am, Miss Gilbert. I don't want to question you at this time. Just take it easy."

"It's all right," she said. She pushed her fingers hard against her forehead. "I don't feel anything. I can't understand anything. How did it happen?"

"You know where your father was this afternoon?"

"No. He just wasn't there when I got home from school. How did he—die?"

Clapp hesitated. "We found your father in the ocean at the foot of Sunset Cliffs out past Ocean Beach. He was between two rocks below the Sunset House."

Kevin's shoulder stiffened under Walter James' hand.

"He may have fallen from the balcony," Clapp continued, "or he may have slipped off one of the paths along the cliff."

"Walter!" she moaned. "We were there tonight. We were at Sunset House."

The big man wrinkled his forehead and looked at Walter James.

"We went there for dinner tonight." Walter James gave a frowning nod at the top of Kevin's head.

Clapp lifted the phone and said, "Send up a matron." He regarded the girl gently. "There's no indication of

anything wrong, Miss Gilbert. Apparently your father just went out there for some reason and accidentally fell. It was sometime this afternoon or tonight."

"I should feel something," Kevin whimpered. "We were never very close but Dad's always been—been *there*. I don't understand." She began to cry against her hand. "He can't be gone!"

A SOFT knock at the door let in a bored police woman in a dark dress. "This is Miss Gilbert, Mrs. Marsh. She's had quite a shock. If you'll give her a sedative and let her lie down in Stein's office—no, make it the couch in the next office."

The matron took the girl's hand. She stood up unsteadily. "I don't want to be any trouble," she said. "Maybe it would be better if I lie down a little. Will you come sit with me, Walter?"

He patted her hand. "I'll be there in a few minutes. Just take it easy for a while. I'll be right in."

The two women went out, the matron quietly closing the door. Walter James and Clapp sat in the early morning stillness. Finally the big man stamped his feet and went to the small ice box. "Beer?" he asked.

"For Christ sakes, no!" Walter James snapped.

"I know it sounds pretty horrible," Clapp sighed. He pulled out a can and plunged the opener into it. "But this has been the God damndest day I've ever had! And I've had some pretty bad ones." He took a long gulp. "I got to have something."

Walter James stared at the black and silver cigarette case. "She'll never be able to forget that she gave me this the night her father got killed."

Clapp frowned at him through the match flame. "Why do you say 'got killed'?"

The match clicked in the bottom of the waste basket. "You know what you're looking for, Clapp. Did you find it?"

"No. Stein tells me the body was pretty well beat up. From the rocks probably. There's nothing to show that Gilbert was pushed over the cliff. It wouldn't take more than a gentle shove—I suppose it's happened before.

"When did you find him?"

"About ten o'clock. Some couple that went down to the bottom of the path to fool around thought they saw something and reported it."

"Nobody saw him fall then?"

"Naturally not. Oh, Stein says there is one bruise across his throat that might have been caused before death. If somebody had hit him in the throat, he couldn't have yelled on the way down." He shrugged wearily. "Then again the noise of the ocean could cover up a scream. Or he may have jumped on purpose. It's whatever you want to make it." After another swallow of beer, he said, "What do you want to make it?"

Walter James sucked on the cigarette. "Murder, I guess. I talked to Gilbert this morning—a little. He was despondent. But he was willing to talk the situation over with me as long as it wasn't in his office. That was about eleven thirty. I didn't see him again."

"Where was he supposed to meet you?"

"That's the crazy part. Sunset House at three o'clock. I got there at three but he wasn't around. I waited till four and went back to his house. He wasn't there so I took Kevin out to dinner. The Sunset House had looked like a nice place so I took her there. God, what a thing to do!"

"That's the way things happen, James," Clapp said. "Coincidence in

there screwing up the works. You take your girl out to dinner and a couple of hundred feet below her father's washing around in the surf with a broken neck. But your story checks."

Walter James sat erect. "What do you mean—checks?"

"Oh, don't go off half-cocked at this time of morning. Maslar put a man on Gilbert today just to be on the safe side. Gilbert went out to the Sunset House at *two* o'clock. The tail lost him there and sat around waiting for him to show again. At three o'clock he saw you come in and start looking around for the old man. That's all."

"That's all? What was Gilbert doing at Sunset House an hour before he was supposed to meet me there?"

CLAPP spread his hands. "How in the hell am I to know? The man's dead now."

"Sure," said the slender detective bitterly. "He was pushed over the cliff between two and three o'clock. He was keeping an appointment with somebody besides me. You know the question."

"Who?"

"Did Maslar's bright boy see anybody out there who answered to Dr. Boone's description?"

"A big healthy man?" asked Clapp sarcastically. "They were there in droves, including a state senator. That isn't much to go on. I'm big and used to be healthy myself."

"It's all we've got to go on," snapped Walter James. "Unless you can make the Mexicans wring something more out of Luz. I suppose he got hauled in today? Or did Maslar's men lose him, too?"

"Calm down, son, Maslar's doing a good job. The Mexicans and a couple of F.B.I. men surrounded the Devil's Bar this afternoon and closed in like

clockwork. But the human element kicked the whole thing in the seat of the pants. When Esteban Luz saw he was trapped, he blew his brains out. Nice neat suicide with witnesses."

The smaller man strode over to the window. "Damn!" he finally said.

"Yeah," agreed Clapp. "I've never seen a case before where so many leads end up with so many corpses. This case has a curse on it. Relax."

Walter James sat down on the window sill and laughed silently, helplessly. "And just think—Dr. Boone's home getting a good night's sleep. He hasn't ended up as a corpse."

"Cheer up, James. Neither have we."

"It's getting closer. Tomorrow you can check up on who left the lights on in my apartment. And who started shooting from across the alley about seven o'clock when I was about to walk in."

Clapp slammed his hand flat on the desk blotter. "Not again!"

Walter James gave him a sardonic grin. "From behind a fence in the used car lot in back of the Serra Apartments. The shot came through the rear window and was supposed to nail me when I opened my door and stood in the light. Luckily, I caught on. I never leave my lights burning."

Clapp said, "I'll send Jim out first thing in the morning."

"Just don't wake me up. The landlady's pretty nosy. There's an off chance she may have seen something. You can at least dig the slug out of the woodwork if your prowling men haven't done it already. I'm ready to guarantee that it's a .25 caliber from the other gun of the set I gave to Hal."

The big man pulled a report from his desk drawer and studied it. "James, maybe you shouldn't have been in such a hurry to finish off John Darmer and young Esteban Luz."

Walter James' face was impassive. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Clapp hunched his shoulders impatiently. "I'm not after you. You could probably prove self-defense, anyway. But you're not fooling me any. The job had your name written all over it."

"Maybe."

"I wish you'd thought twice about it. They might have been able to tell us something."

"They might have been able."

"At least with Big Steve gone, we would have had something."

Walter James smiled. "I hate to get shot to little bits just so you'd have somebody to grill, Clapp."

CLAPP replaced the paper and slammed the drawer. "It's written off as an accident. Let's hope nobody gets too nosy. It would have been easier on me if you had at least reported it."

"Maybe I didn't feel like it."

"Hell," said Clapp and stood up. "There's a lot of things a guy doesn't feel like doing. I didn't feel like suspending Felix from the force this morning and getting together an indictment."

"Felix? What's the story?"

Walter James began to notice how tired the big man really was. The clear cut planes of his face seemed blurred and his head sagged on his shoulders.

"The usual one," said Clapp slowly. "Good cop goes bad for a lousy fifty dollars a month extra. I put a check on the switchboard for all Tijuana calls and we caught Felix trying to tip off Luz about the raid." Infuriated, he spat out, "He didn't even have sense enough to use an outside phone!"

Walter James hit Clapp's arm gently with the back of his hand. "I'm sorry, Clapp. It's nothing you could help."

"No," the big man sighed. "I guess if there's a twist in a man, it grows to the surface eventually. But it still never makes sense. Crime actually doesn't pay—I mean, in dollars and cents. It's low profit and high risk. It doesn't make sense."

Walter James snapped his fingers. "On this Gilbert killing, you might nose into Dr. Boniface's movements this afternoon."

Clapp raised his heavy eyebrows. "Something stirring?"

"I'm pretty sure he was hanging around Sunset House. And I'm not forgetting that he's a big, healthy man, either."

Clapp made a note on his desk pad. "Okay."

Walter James roused himself. "I think I'll see if Kevin's in any shape to go home."

"James."

"What?"

"I'll do my darnedest to keep her father's connection with this marijuana ring undercover. She doesn't know anything obviously, and I can probably keep the investigation away from her. And definitely out of the papers."

"Thanks, Clapp."

The big man smiled and closed his eyes for a second. "Just take good care of the girl. I like her."

"I like Kevin too. More than you would ever believe," said Walter James soberly. "As soon as this Dr. Boone thing is finished, I'm going to marry her and take her back to Atlanta. I promise I'll take good care of her."

CHAPTER XXII

KEVIN found the note late that afternoon.

They had slept most of the day and had arisen about three o'clock. The girl wanted some fresh clothes, so Wal-

ter James drove her out to the empty house in East San Diego. There she hastily collected a few things and they hurried silently back to the Serra Apartments.

The slender man keyed the door and swung it open for Kevin to enter. The note had been pushed under the door in their absence and was about a foot inside, touching the edge of the rug. She stepped on it before she noticed it and picked it up.

The envelope was cheap and plain, the two dozen for ten cents variety. Across it was written "Walter James" in bright blue ink; the writing was neatly small, slightly backhanded.

He ripped it open. Together, they were scanning the simple message when Clapp knocked lightly at the open door.

"Hello, folks. Can I come in?"

They jumped and Walter James said, "Come on in and sit down, Clapp."

The big man shut the door and took off his hat. "Didn't mean to frighten you. Just thought I'd drop around and see how you were making out. Things are quiet downtown."

"We're glad to see you," Kevin said. "Please sit down."

Clapp lowered himself into theavenport. After Walter James was settled in the armchair, the girl coiled at his feet, resting one arm across his knees. The slender man let the note lie loosely in his lap.

"Not a bad place you found here," said Clapp. "You were lucky."

"It's nice enough," Walter James admitted.

The girl spoke suddenly, evenly. "Did you come to tell us you found my father had been murdered?"

The men turned startled eyes upon her, then glanced at each other.

"Don't keep anything from me," she pleaded. "I'm old enough. I can't

shock any more. You won't hurt me by telling me anything."

Clapp began, "What makes you think—"

"It's sort of obvious. You know this. Shasta Lynn had some connection with the men you're after. You know my father had some connection with Shasta Lynn. And right in the middle of your investigation, he dies. It's a perfect circle—even I can see that."

"It isn't a perfect circle," murmured Walter James.

"Maybe not. But something isn't right somewhere. Dad was too cautious to ever fall off a cliff. And he would never have committed suicide." She puzzled a moment. "He was sort of despondent these last couple of days, but I think that was because I was so obviously crazy about Walter. That's the way fathers are, I guess. But he would never have committed suicide any more than he would've burnt up a thousand dollar bill. Everything was an investment to him so he could take care of himself and me—he wouldn't suddenly just throw everything away."

"Well," said Clapp. He pushed the inside of his lip with his tongue. "I'm naturally a little suspicious of everything. But, honestly, Miss Gilbert, there isn't anything off color yet. It is an odd time for your father to die and we'll investigate as a matter of course. As yet, we don't know anything at all."

Kevin gazed at him levelly.

"If we happen to run onto anything, I won't keep it from you. I promise you that much."

"Thank you," she replied. "I'll appreciate it."

"No," said the big man, shifting around on the cushions, "what I really came to see you about was the attack last night."

"I've told you all we know," said Walter James.

"Oh, I know that," smiled Clapp. "But amazingly enough, us cops managed to find out a little more. Jim talked to your landlady this morning."

"She's a born source."

"That's what Jim found out. There was somebody in this building yesterday afternoon who she'd never seen before. Jim checked all the apartments and none of them had ever heard of—this person."

"Was it our big healthy man?"

"Not quite. It was a large old woman, white haired and apparently in mourning. She wore a black satin dress, way out of date like some old women do, and a small black veil over her face. Oh, yes, and she wore old-fashioned flatheel shoes and was sort of buxom."

Kevin said seriously, "Is it anyone you know, Walter?" and Clapp grinned.

WALTER JAMES frowned, letting his mouth hang open as if he were about to say something.

The big man went on. "The slug we dug out of your door was from a .25 just like you thought it'd be. Which ties in with the first attack last Saturday night. Also, it being a woman ties in with the face powder on the first gun. Now—who is this old babe? She doesn't sound like a passion murderess."

"A woman," Walter James muttered.

"Jim checked pretty carefully. Your landlady has good eyes and she swears up and down it was a woman. Of course, this veil obscured her face, but she claims she was built like a woman."

"The flat shoes," said Kevin. "Couldn't it have been a man dressed up in woman's clothes?"

Clapp pushed his heavy lips together. "We only know what we're told. Take it or leave it."

Walter James shook his head. "This

old lady doesn't quite fit my conception of Dr. Boone—except that they're both apparently large people." He lit two cigarettes and passed one down to Kevin. "But think of Shasta Lynn. She's large. Her blonde hair could be fixed up to pass for white. Take a look at this."

He plucked the note from his lap and tossed it over to Clapp. The big man held it gingerly by the edges and read it.

"Today's date. 'I would like to talk to you immediately after the last show tonight. Signed Shasta Lynn'. Hey!"

Walter James smiled. "That's the way I feel. An opening maybe. Maybe we've got the thin edge of the wedge in at last."

"Yeah. This Lynn wench is the only off-balance woman in the picture so far—if, as Miss Gilbert says, this pistol-packing grandmother *is* a woman. Or unless your disappearing Ethel Lantz has gone berserk and come cross country to put the finger on you. But this Shasta Lynn—" He shook his head. "Something about her has never jibed and I'm not sure just what."

"We agree."

Kevin spoke up. "I wonder what she has to say?"

Walter James squeezed her arm. "We'll find out tonight. Want to meet us in front of the Grand Theater about nine or nine thirty, Clapp?"

"Pleasure. I love the theater."

Walter James laughed, exhilarated. "We can all go in together and see enough of the show so you'll have some new material for your conferences. I'll go back to Shasta's dressing room and wait for her to come off after her number. If I need any official pressure, I'll give you a call."

THE big man grinned back. "Greis-singer will throw a fit when he sees

me walk in."

"My relatives would throw a fit, too, if they saw me going to a show so soon after Dad's death," Kevin said softly. "But I just have to see this thing end."

Walter James took the note and slapped it against Kevin's arm. "Invitation to a dance! God, I hope it's an opening at last!"

"It's something," said Clapp. "Shasta Lynn can't be Dr. Boone, but it's something."

"I wonder who Dr. Boone is?" mused the girl.

"A killer," said Walter James.

"And a weed runner," added Clapp.

"He seems almost superhuman," Kevin confessed. "Do you think you'll ever catch him?"

"Miss Gilbert," said Clapp soberly, "nobody can foresee everything—that's why it's so hard to commit a perfect crime. Just when you think you've taken care of everything, something or somebody pops up to block the deal."

"The unknown factor," Walter James said softly.

"Yeah, that's it."

"Course, I don't know anything about this," said Kevin. "All I've done is read detective stories. But it seems to me you were very lucky to connect all these murders with each other. I mean—all these people died in so many different ways."

"The girl's got a point," said Clapp. "Run an itemized list. Hal Lantz was gunned out because he was getting too close to Dr. Boone. His wife went into hiding or was kidnaped—or worse—presumably because of the same reason. In Denver Melvin Emig was strangled and burned because he was part of Boone's organization. Then we get to this town. The Filipino, Fernando Solez, is knifed for the same reason as Emig." He hesitated. "Plus the possibility that Mr. Gilbert was pushed

over a cliff for some reason we don't see."

"Add three incidental deaths," the slight man said quickly. "Esteban Luz was part of Dr. Boone's outfit. When the police close in, he blows his brains out. Then there's Little Steve and Danner—"

"Disposed of by you." Clapp sighed. "That's a lot of blood on somebody's hands. I hope to God we're not way off the track somehow."

Kevin chewed at her knuckle sadly. "I never realized before there were so many ways to die. So many ways to kill people. Why are there so many deadly weapons?"

Clapp rubbed his lip and looked down at her. "Listen, Miss Gilbert. I've come to figure that man is the only deadly weapon. Take a gun. It's an absolutely harmless thing—even makes a good honest paperweight—until some man gets his hand around it. You can strip a gun down to its basic parts and it's lost its power. You can reduce man to his chemical elements but you've always got the spirit, or whatever you call it, left. And that spirit will find some damned way to do evil."

Walter James felt the girl shudder against his knee. "But," she protested, "there's lots and lots of good people."

Clapp nodded. "Okay. I know my viewpoint's warped. Remember that the customers I deal with have gotten their hands dirty."

"You make Dr. Boone sound like a malignant ghost," smiled Walter James.

Clapp stood up and took his hat. "I'm open to suggestions," he said. "So far we have one woman missing and seven men killed. If I hear a chain clank tonight, so help me God, I'll start firing."

"I can't blame you," said Walter

James, "but I got a feeling that our bad luck is going to change."

Kevin looked up at him excitedly. Clapp cocked an inquiring eyebrow. The slender man's eyes were gleaming oddly.

"Yes?"

Walter James laughed and threw out his hands in an expansive gesture. "It's just a hunch and I'm probably whistling in the dark. But I think we're about due to meet our elusive friend, Dr. Boone."

CHAPTER XXIII

"**W**HY did we come so early?"

Kevin asked him. They stood by the full-length picture of Shasta Lynn. The gaping bullet hole in her midriff had not been touched.

"I wanted to take a look at the audience this time," Walter James explained. "I don't want to miss the good doctor again tonight." His eyes roved restlessly over the few latecomers queued at the boxoffice. Kevin brushed a small length of thread from the skirt of her chocolate brown suit.

"Do you think he'll be here tonight?" Her voice held an undercurrent of excitement. Walter James looked at her bent coppery head with its ridiculously small cloche hat of brown felt.

"I hope so." He stroked his head gently. "The stitches come out in another five days." The puckered scars showed vividly under the ruthless bulbs of the marquee.

Kevin raised her head. "What did you say, Walter?"

"Never mind," he said. "Here comes Clapp."

The big man came striding up Market Street. He shook hands with Walter James. Clapp's eyes sparkled with excitement. The weariness of the night before seemed to have been shrugged

off like a coat.

"Let's go," he said.

"You by yourself?"

Clapp showed his teeth in a grin. "Don't you believe it. This whole block's covered. We're locking the barn door ahead of time tonight."

Walter James said, "Make sure somebody doesn't steal the barn."

Kevin frowned at them both. "Isn't everybody jumping to conclusions? I mean, all that we got was a note from Shasta Lynn. It might not have anything to do with Dr. Boone."

"Miss Gilbert," Clapp said seriously, "when you don't have anything else to go on, then you start jumping at conclusions."

"And don't forget," pointed out Walter James, "Shasta Lynn has been more or less of a question mark since the beginning."

Kevin took both their arms. "Well, I hope you're not too disappointed if nothing happens. I'll keep my fingers crossed."

"Do that," Walter James advised her solemnly.

Greissinger was standing in back of the burly ticket taker as the three went into the theater. His eyes widened at the sight of the heavy detective.

"Evening, Greissinger," Clapp said as he surrendered his ticket.

"Uh—good evening, Lieutenant," Greissinger said. He brushed the ticket taker aside and put a pudgy hand on Clapp's arm. "Lieutenant, there isn't nothing wrong, is there?"

Clapp's face was bland. "Wrong?"

Greissinger looked around hurriedly and lowered his voice. "I mean, you're not going to raid us or anything, are you? We've been cooperating, Lieutenant, just like you asked—"

"Don't worry," Clapp cut him short. "I'm not going to run you in. I just love the theater, Greissinger. You

should feel complimented." He retrieved his arm and followed Walter James and Kevin into the house, leaving the fat manager staring after him.

They brushed past John Brownlee as they entered the aisle. The thin man was carrying a wooden tray, a quarter filled with boxes of crackerjack and bags of popcorn. Brownlee gave the trio a startled glance and hurried past them into the lobby.

Clapp grinned. "Everybody is so glad to see us," he murmured to Walter James.

As they sat down, Kevin whispered, "I'm glad they didn't have another Filipino taking tickets out there. I almost expected to see—him."

A VOICE behind her said in a soft whisper, "Laura—". She turned slowly in the hard seat. The puzzled frown between her eyes vanished when she saw Bob Newcomb watching her from dark, pained eyes.

Kevin said fiercely, "Bob, why don't you—"

"Don't bawl me out again, Laura." Walter James snapped his head around with a quick movement; the younger man met his gaze with no embarrassment. "I just want to see that you're all right."

A cutting phrase trembled on the girl's lips, then she put her mouth into a firm line and turned her face toward the stage. Walter James squeezed her hand reassuringly.

On the stage, the twelve girl chorus was alternately hulaing and jitterbugging to pseudo-Congo music. They wore bright strips of cloth as skirts and danced with their legs apart, knees slightly bent. All of them showed complete lack of interest in the routine; two girls were giggling at a third who was stomping determinedly with drunken concentration.

"Pretty bad," sighed Clapp. He hunched down in his seat. Kevin looked around at Walter James. The slim detective was sitting very erect, his head turning slowly from side to side. He was watching the audience instead of the performers. After a moment, he felt her eyes on him and turned to her.

"What is it, Walter?" she whispered.

His eyes were gleaming and the corners of his mouth were quirked in a halfsmile. "Just checking on our little flock," he whispered back.

"Did you see—" she began, but he put a slim finger to his lips and turned his attention to the stage. After a moment of puzzled frowning, Kevin did the same.

Silently, they sat through an hour and a half of grimy blackouts, featuring Danny Host in a half dozen characterizations, stepping sisters, an obese stripper who failed to tease, and an enthusiastic xylophonist. Kevin jumped when the tin voice began the familiar cajole: "And now—what every man in San Diego had been dreaming of—the Grand Theater's own — lovely Shasta Lynn!"

The house lights dimmed out. "Walter!" Kevin whispered and put out her hand to him. He was gone.

Walter James bumped into the man just outside the stage door. His hand snapped to the .38 weighting down his right coat pocket.

The shadow spoke with the voice of Danny Host, "Why don'tcha watch where you're going?"

Walter James let his hand move away from the gun. "That's a bad habit you've got, Host—smoking out here in back."

Host leaned forward and peered at him closely in the glow of his cigarette. He let out his breath noisily. "Oh, it's you, huh? What are you doing snoop-around here?"

Walter James went around him and jerked open the iron door. The white light fell across the lanky comedian's face. He was staring at the shorter man with narrowed eyes. "Collecting autographs," Walter James told him pleasantly. "I'll get yours on the way out."

A couple of girls glanced at him speculatively when he came up the cement steps to the stage. Several of them were trying to persuade the drunken member of the jungle routine to for God's sake get up off the floor. Dixie Lake, attired in a whisper of a silver dancing costume, threw him a look of recognition and opened her mouth as if to speak. Walter James ignored her.

MADELINE HARMS, her back toward him, was standing in the wings looking out onto the stage. Over her shoulder he could see Shasta Lynn, cool and blue-gowned, facing the curtain, waiting for it to go up.

Her dressing room door was ajar. Walter James slipped in and shut it behind him. Nothing had been changed since his previous visit except that a folding chair had been added. He looked at the unfinished plywood walls speculatively. Then he began to work purposefully, deftly. From his trousers pocket he produced a squat derringer with a short, ornately carved butt. The carving contrasted with the simple modernity of the twin inset .22 barrels. The gun had two triggers inside the guard, one slightly forward of the other.

Walter James cocked his ear to the music, carefully analyzing the heavy rhythm of the drumbeats. In a moment, Shasta Lynn would begin to sing. He turned the gun mouth toward himself, pointed it slightly upwards, and peered at his aim in the mirror. Loud applause and whistles broke in from out

front; that meant that the curtain had gone up. On the crest of a drumbeat, he pressed the forward trigger.

Drowned by music and uproar, the explosion of the .22 was little more than a loud pop. The slug buried itself high in the plywood wall of the dressing room. The thin cut in Walter James' left coat sleeve began to seep crimson.

Hastily, he sat before the dressing table and wiped the refit derringer clean with a makeup rag. He opened the table drawer and, holding the gun in the rag, smeared its metal in the loose powder that was scattered there. The slight man regarded the dirtied weapon painfully. His arm was beginning to throb now. He closed the drawer and laid the derringer on the dressing table top, tossing the rag over it. He spread his fingers and looked at his slender hands. Steady as a rock.

He heard footsteps coming toward the door and a smile worked its way quickly across his face. He brought the .38 out of his coat pocket and held it loosely in his hand. Outside, he could hear Shasta Lynn's cool voice singing, "I cried for you—now it's your turn to cry over me . . ."

The knock sounded loud on the thin door. Walter James got up, holding the pistol in his right hand. With his left arm, throbbing now from the bullet wound, he threw the plywood door open.

"Won't you come in, Dr. Boone?" he asked.

The startled face of Major Rockwell looked at him.

CHAPTER XXIV

MAJOR ROCKWELL walked into the dressing room. Walter James closed the door behind him and leaned his back against it. Rockwell looked

at him with astonished eyes.

"What is this all about, Mr. James?"

"Sit down," suggested the slender detective. "I'll try to explain it to you." He cocked an ear to the stage where Shasta Lynn was finishing her song. "It'll have to be brief, though."

The major put one hand on the back of the dressing table chair. "You called me Dr. Boone. That's the second time you've made a mysterious reference to that name, Mr. James."

"Yes," said Walter James and smiled a cat smile. "Because that's who you are, Major."

"Let me assure you—" began the heavy set man. Walter James interrupted him by raising his hand with the gun in it.

"I don't want to argue with you, Major—I don't have the time tonight." He steadied the gun on Rockwell's midsection. "I've been looking for Dr. Boone. I told you that. He killed my partner and when your partner is killed you have to square accounts."

Rockwell's tanned face whitened perceptibly. "I swear, Mr. James—" he said in the voice that held the hint of a quaver.

Walter James' arm was throbbing like the beat of a drum. "You don't have to swear, Major," he said softly. "Because I know that you're telling the truth. You're not really Dr. Boone—but you'll do."

Rockwell's voice assumed the tone proper for soothing a dangerous maniac. "Mr. James, you don't know what you're saying. Your phone call this afternoon—you said it was important that I be here—"

The slim man grimaced impatiently. "I know what I said. Sit down, Major." He gestured forcefully with the gun. Rockwell sank slowly into the dressing table chair, keeping his eyes riveted on the smaller man's face.

From his coat pocket, Walter James brought forth several lengths of neutral colored fish line. With the deftness born of long practice, he tied the big man's wrists to the back of the chair, and then, bending down, his ankles to the legs.

Blood from his wound was dripping off his hand as he arose. He smiled at the bound man. "They're only slip-knots, Major—they wouldn't hold you a minute if I left you alone."

Rockwell said, his voice underwritten by terror, "What—what are you going to do with me?"

The slender man was listening to the music accompanying Shasta Lynn's strip tease. He brought his attention back to Rockwell with an effort. "Oh, I thought I told you. You're going to be Dr. Boone. Clapp has worked awfully hard on this case and he deserves to have a Dr. Boone, even if it's the wrong one."

Rockwell stared at him, his lips parted slightly. Walter James squinted thoughtfully at the pistol in his hand. He sat down in the folding chair.

"The unknown factors, like Shasta Lynn, screw you up sometimes in cases like this," he mused, "but I think it will all work out." A movement of Rockwell's head made him look up sharply. In the mirror he saw that the door behind him had slid open.

"Keep your hands on your knees, Walter."

The old woman in funereal black shut the door in back of her without looking at it. Walter James sat quietly, watching her in the mirror. The silvered pistol in her hand pointed unwaveringly at his spine.

"Good evening, Ethel," he said.

WITH a quick gesture, she flicked the black veil over her fashionless hat. Her face was pale and set,

with no wrinkles at all under the heavy powder. Shiny white hair was netted tightly.

"Let go of the gun," she said, almost in a whisper. Walter James allowed his fingers to relax and the .38 thudded against the wooden floor. Major Rockwell let out a wavering sigh.

"Thank God!" he said. The woman gave him the briefest of glances.

"Who's this?"

Walter James said softly, "Why, this is Dr. Boone, Ethel."

"Dr. Boone!" The woman's lips curled. "He's not Dr. Boone—you know and I know that there isn't any Dr. Boone."

"Yes," agreed the slight man. "You and I know it. But nobody else does. And Dr. Boone has been very useful to me."

"You didn't think you could get away with it, did you, Walter?" asked Ethel Lantz. "Don't move your hands!"

The slender man froze. "I am getting away with it," he said. "I knew you were here after we found the gun, but I'll admit I didn't expect you to show up tonight. Did you write that note from Shasta Lynn?"

The woman stared in the mirror at his flat blue eyes. "After I failed twice, I decided I had to make my opportunity to kill you." Her mouth smiled bitterly and alone. "Occasionally, people can be more clever than you, Walter. I knew that Shasta Lynn was the one thing you weren't sure about. I knew that a message from her would bring you in with your guard down."

Walter James looked tenderly at her reflection. "Ethel," he said, "you shouldn't have been afraid to come back to Atlanta. We could have shared the money and carried out the plan together. Then we could have had each other. You know that. I've been waiting for you to get in touch with me."

The old-young face twisted hatefully. "I didn't want you—I wanted Hal. But you killed him, Walter. You wanted the money all to yourself. The plan would have worked for all of us, but you wanted it all to yourself."

"It can still work, Ethel." Walter James inched forward on the chair. "We can get rid of Shasta Lynn tonight. Give Clapp the major here as a fall guy. Then you come out of hiding and—"

Ethel shook her white head and the old-fashioned hat bobbed. "Nobody else is going to die, Walter—nobody except you. I don't want anything more now that Hal can't be with me. All I want is to watch you die—the way you watched Hal die."

The slim man's lips tightened. "You haven't taken very good care of the guns, Ethel. The one you left across the street last Saturday night hadn't been cleaned since I gave them to you."

"I'm not going to look down. That's what you want, isn't it? You see, I've thought this out carefully. You've stopped winning."

Walter James shook his head sadly. "If only you had come back to Atlanta."

"I was afraid. Anybody that knows you should be afraid of you. Your eyes—the way they are now. That's the way they were that night when Hal was in Denver and you suggested that we kill him and carry out the plan by ourselves. That's when I began to be afraid. That's why I went to Miami before Hal got back." Her voice trembled. "I let him down. I was too weak and too afraid of you to stay in Atlanta and warn him."

"We can work something out," he said, sitting very still. "We've meant such a lot to each other."

WITH her free hand, she fingered the bound white hair. "I made

a mistake with you. Hal is the only person who ever meant anything to me. He still is. I'm doing this for him—I wouldn't have the strength to do it for myself. I've lived in fear for the last two months, Walter. I was afraid every time a cop walked toward me and every time I saw a man your size. There's been no one to help me—except the thought of Hal."

Walter James looked in the mirror at the pistol pointing at his back. He glanced at Rockwell. The major was a statue in his chair, hardly moving even to breath. "Why didn't you go to the police, Ethel?"

"I didn't want you to get away. You're smarter than they are. And I didn't want to go to prison. That's hell on a woman. I don't want to get wrinkled and ugly—let my hair get dry and coarse." She finger it tenderly under the net. "I've hurt it now. I had to bleach it and put bluing on it and cut some of it off. Wear these awful clothes so no one would recognize me." Her eyes flooded with wetness and she screamed at him. "I haven't been anybody for the last two months! I haven't even been a person! I've been afraid of you!"

The gun wavered.

In one movement Walter James stood up and kicked the chair back into her. An explosion burned his side and the mirror broke over his clawing hands. He found the derringer under the rag, whirled and fired. The trailing rag drifted to the floor.

Ethel Lantz stood weaving from side to side, horror on her incongruous face. The black satin across her stomach began to stain liquidly. The .25 slid from her fingers and clattered on the floor.

"I guess I never really thought I could beat you," she said weakly and crumpled clumsily in a heap.

Walter James looked at his hands outlined against her black form. They were beginning to tremble. Not yet! Please, not yet! He turned slowly and looked at Major Rockwell.

Rockwell drew back in the chair as far as he could move. "James—" he pleaded in a hoarse voice. Walter James picked up his .38 with his right hand and squinted at the bigger man. The pain in his side was like a roaring fire, crackling and burning inside him.

The door slammed open and Clapp stood there, one hand clutched in his coat pocket. "James!" he shouted. "Put down that gun—"

Walter James threw the empty derringer into the pit of the big man's stomach. The detective bent over in the doorway, trying to draw a gun from his pocket. Hurling himself forward, the slender man cut at him twice, viciously. The edge of his flattened palm sliced across Clapp's arm and again across the side of his heavy neck. Clapp toppled out of the dressing room.

Walter James jumped after him. A cluster of half clad girls huddled on the concrete steps, terrified eyes staring at Shasta Lynn's dressing room. They screamed hysterically at the sight of the small man's searching gun, crowding back and blocking the iron stage door effectively.

The pain in his arm and in his side were one united demon, chewing at him, trying to weaken him. He could feel the blood trickling down his leg. He spun and lurched toward the stage.

Greissinger and Madeline Harms stood in the wings, in a narrow corridor of drapes leading to the stage. They stared at him with wide eyes, unprotesting, as he shoved roughly between them and walked onto the stage. He was breathing heavily. The gun in his hand felt as though it weighed a ton.

SHASTA LYNN posed nudely against against the opposite of the proscenium arch, a spotlight limning her powdered body. She looked at him; then, as recognition came, she screamed.

She was the reason the plan hadn't worked. Shasta Lynn, the unknown factor. Walter James leveled the gun barrel at her naked body and, holding it steady with an effort, fired. She screamed again and fell back against the plaster arch. She hadn't fallen down. She wasn't dead. What was wrong? He'd fired at her breast, but she was pressing her hands over a red spot on her thigh. Walter James shook his head wildly to break the film that was pressing against his eyeballs.

The circle of spotlight glided across the stage to envelop him, paint him in glaring relief. He could see better now. There was a panicky stirring in the audience. He pointed the .38 at the blurred, shifting heads. Run, sheep, run. Kill the cowardly frightened monster. Kill them all! This was what power meant. Size had nothing to do with it; age had nothing to do with it. He squinted against the spotlight. There was really no noise from his audience—that screaming and roaring was from his aching side. Where had everybody gone? He wanted to explain to them: power is something you hold in your hand that makes everybody afraid of you. That damned spotlight!

He thrust up the gun and fired at it.

It glared down on him without mercy. The film was closing in again, blurring, erasing. The spotlight seared at him. It had to be turned out. Let's turn out the lights and go to sleep.

A wave of noise swept over his aching side and jolted him toward the footlights. With an effort, he turned his head and saw Clapp standing in the winds. The big man had a long black police revolver levelled over his forearm. Smoke was sucking out of its barrel.

He felt his shoe smashing bulbs in the footlight trough as he caught his balance. Too bad, Clapp, you were a pretty smart cop. With both hands he lifted the heavy .38 and aimed it at the big man, the big man with the stony face.

The long black gun spoke. It said, "Walter!" with Kevin's voice. His body jarred again. He stopped trying to squeeze the trigger. Let Kevin do it. She was floating down the aisle toward him, her lovely mouth twisted open, calling to him. Don't let that punk Newcomb stop you, Kevin—help me pull this trigger, then we'll go off together and have a wonderful time.

A third explosion ripped from Clapp's gun. There was no jolt this time, no shock. Kevin had woven some magic about the bullet so it wouldn't hurt his side. Kevin was making them take the spotlight out of the back of the theater so he could get some rest. The circle of light got farther and farther away, a pinpoint that finally flicked out. This was better.

IT NEVER FAILS!

SEVERAL years ago the midwest was ravaged by a potato bug scourge. Farmers sought frantically for a means of saving the potato crops. One racketeer lent a willing hand. Each farmer listened eagerly as he explained his miracle potato-bug killer. "We guarantee that our product gets rid of them forever," he said. "Five dol-

lars cash, delivery within a week."

A few days later the unwary farmer unwrapped his purchase and found a small metal block with a hollow in it. A pestle fit the hollow. Within the package were the following directions: "Place one potato-bug inside. Crush with pestle. Dead bug. Satisfaction or money back."—*R. Livingston.*

MURDER ON THE HIGH SEAS

By L. M. PHILLIPS

IT WAS in the middle of the night—and in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. The date—July 14, 1896, just fifty years ago. The ship was the *Herbert Fuller*, a barkentine carrying a cargo of lumber from Boston to Rosario in Argentina. Eleven men and one woman were aboard her when she set sail on the sixth. Only nine persons returned alive.

For murder stalked the decks of the *Herbert Fuller* that gloomy night at sea, a sensational murder that was to bring one of the most gruesome cases in history before the courts of Massachusetts.

The voyage began peacefully enough. The captain was Charles Nash, forty-two, a seaman of many years and fine reputation. Accompanying him was his wife, Laura, to whom he was happily married. Only one passenger was aboard, a student of Harvard University, whose name was Lester Monks.

An unusual crew manned the ship. There was the steward, a West-Indian; a German, two Swedes; a Russian Finn; a Dutchman; a Frenchman—who without authorization, had left his country and membership in its Navy. In regard to their names, many had more than one, and a few had many aliases. First Mate Bram, for instance, had four names altogether.

On the night of July 13, Charley Brown, one of the sailors, was at the wheel of the ship. Mate Bram was on deck, and the captain was in the chart-room. The others retired early.

At 2 A.M. Mr. Monks, the passenger, was suddenly awakened by a woman's scream. Alarmed, he ran to the chart-room for the captain. He found him—but dead—fiendishly hacked, lying in a pool of blood on the floor. Rushing to Mrs. Nash's room he found a similar sight. She, too, had been treacherously attacked and hacked almost beyond recognition.

Horried, the passenger ran madly up to the deck and almost collided with Bram. Together they crouched on the deck until morning, on Bram's suggestion, as he feared mutiny. Toward morning they awakened the steward and sent him to awaken the second mate. He hastily returned to report that another of their number was dead. The officer lay in his bunk, covered with blood, his head split open and one finger cut off.

According to both Monk and the steward, Bram's reaction to the news was most peculiar. He showed a great agitation and fear, constantly demanding that "they protect him from the crew, who might mutiny and kill him." He wept copiously.

When the three went back on deck, it was Bram who discovered the murder weapon, partly con-

cealed beneath a lashing board. It was a new axe, blood-stained from handle to head. Bram quickly threw it overboard, maintaining that the others might use it against them.

When, in his excitement, Bram vomited on the deck, he told them that the murdered second mate had given him a drink at midnight which he was convinced was drugged. The steward suggested they collect the matter in a bottle and take it ashore for analysis. The mate, however, slid into it and managed to destroy the evidence.

Later, Bram suggested they throw the victims overboard altogether and consider the matter closed. The crew overruled him, and a strange Burial At Sea Service was held, in which the dead were sewn into sheets, placed in a dory and fastened over with a canvas cover.

The course of the ship was then changed to Halifax, the nearest port. For a time Charley Brown, suspected by the crew, was placed in irons. He, in turn, said that while at the wheel the night of the murders, he had seen through the window of the chart-room that something was amiss. Immediately afterward Bram had appeared on deck. Charley was then released and Bram put in irons.

The case began in the courts in December, 1896 and did not end until two trials and almost two years later when Bram, first sentenced to hang, was later given life-imprisonment.

There were many unusual aspects to the case. Whoever he was, the jury saw and heard the murderer, for all those who returned alive on the *Herbert Fuller* appeared in court and testified. The sailors were interned for the entire duration of the trials.

The defense sought to prove that Charley Brown, the chief witness against Bram, was of unsound mind, having had hallucinations and once been institutionalized. Charley was actually accused of being a homicidal maniac. Medical men brought by the prosecution declared him sane. A strong point for the defense was the absence of blood stains on Bram's clothes; the prosecution denied that he would necessarily have been spattered. Charley, on the other hand, had actually been seen disposing of bloody clothes into the sea on the morning following the murders. These he claimed were soiled from the act of sewing the victims into their shrouds.

In the end, however, Bram was found guilty. He served fifteen years of his sentence, was paroled and finally given a full pardon. Not so fortunate was the *Herbert Fuller*. Ill-fated was her life, for though she sailed twenty more years murder lay in wait for her. In World War I, though only a harmless and unarmed old lumber ship, she was attacked by the Germans and sunk.



His shout of alarm as he slipped brought Stephanie running from the house



EVERYTHING HAPPENS TO ME

By FRANCES M. DEEGAN

**They only wanted a place to sleep. What they
got began with a drenching and ended with murder...**

I LIKE being married to Stephanie for an endless variety of reasons. Such as the heart-tilting flash that lights her face at the birth of an idea.

We were somewhere in the State of Illinois, and it had begun to rain, when she turned to me with that gleam. I gripped the wheel tighter. Steffi is a

creature of many ideas, all of them utterly mad. This in no way detracts from the contagion of that preliminary glow.

"We shall sleep with Aunt Sophie," she said, as if concluding a long discussion.

"Who?"

She never fails to startle me. These ideas streak through her mind so fast that she invariably leaves out all explanatory details and we must begin at the end and work backward. It is rather stimulating.

"Aunt Sophie. She has a house," Steffi elucidated now.

"Yes."

"She also has a husband—Uncle Henry."

"Henry what?"

"That I do not remember. What difference? Aunt Sophie will be delighted to see us."

"Oh? When do you plan to visit her?"

"Now. Tonight."

"Very well. I have learned by trial and error that an acquiescent attitude simplifies matters. Raising practical objections merely confuses the issue. "And this house of Aunt Sophie's is located where?"

"We shall come to it, very soon now."

"I see. You have been there before, then?"

"Never. *Jamais de la vie!* She wrote to me a letter. Five, six—maybe it was three years ago, inviting me to visit. It is my instinct which tells me—somewhere near is the house of Aunt Sophie."

"Your instinct didn't happen to mention the address, I suppose?"

"It is only a few hours from Chicago. That is where we are, also. Yess?"

"Approximately, yes."

"Very well. The house you cannot mistake. It has gables, oak trees, and an ancient cistern which must be repaired. I do not remember if she wrote to me three years ago and said the house is five or six hours from Chicago—or if she wrote to me five or six years ago, and the house is three hours from Chicago. But a splendid engineer like you, Walter, you will find it. No?"

"Yes," I said, knowing it was quite improbable.

We had been lost since leaving the highway a good thirty miles back. Rain fell with gentle persistence. Darkness was not far off. And the unpaved road showed no inclination to arrive anywhere. The road was also one of Stephanie's ideas.

Having decided to spend the night at Aunt Sophie's house, she promptly curled up with the limber grace of a dancer, pressed her head against my arm, and slept. Leaving the minor details to me.

Her hair slid across my arm like liquid copper, the scent of it mingling with the smell of country rain. And I wondered idly whether, at this rate, I would find the City of Chicago in time to be present, as consulting engineer, when the bids for construction of the new bridge were opened.

Six months ago I'd planned my trip carefully in order to arrive two days ahead of time. But that was before I married Stephanie. Six all too brief months with Stephanie had made me a confirmed fatalist.

Possibly her ballet training had something to do with her impractical viewpoint; but it was her Russian-French ancestry which gave that unpredictable temperament. It was like living with five or six different women, and it gave me no time to follow my usual meticulous habits. Oddly enough, my work seemed to improve, in spite of the fact that I no longer devoted long hours to planning beforehand, and checking and re-checking specifications after certified prints had been made.

I PAUSED in my reflections and peered through the rain at a ramshackle establishment just ahead. It appeared to be a cross-roads store with a gas pump standing forlornly in front.

A battered sedan was parked at one side.

I pulled up beside the gas pump and Steffi roused, stretched like a kitten, and smiled like an angel. "Uncle Henry," she declared, "has a mustache."

"That's fine," I said, opening the door and stepping into a puddle. "I've always admired a man with a mustache."

"Why do you get out here?"

"I'm going to see if they have any cigarettes."

"But we have cigarettes. Walter, come in out of the wetness."

"I may as well fill up the tank," I said. "If this road doesn't make up its mind where it's going pretty soon, we'll probably need it."

"But of course," said Steffi with touching confidence. "It is so fortunate that you are an engineer, Walter. You think of everything. You would make an expert guide."

I was glad she didn't suspect that what I was really after was some expert guidance myself, on how to get back on the highway to Chicago.

The board sign across the front of the frame building said, "Smith Brothers." The two storekeepers inside were probably as old as the original Smith Brothers, but they lacked the luxuriant foliage. The store itself was a hopeless conglomeration of things and stuff. Apparently no attempt had ever been made to sort it. As a result there was an odd confusion of smells. Cheese mingling with kerosene, and apples with laundry soap. Over it all hung a haze of tobacco smoke.

Five men sat around the unlighted stove at the rear. They broke off a rather heated argument about a lost ring, and stared at me with what I considered unnecessary intensity.

"Bert, see what the fella wants," said an aged individual with a corn cob pipe.

Bert grumbled, creaked a little getting out of his rocking chair, and approached me behind the cluttered counter. He was a lanky, work-worn man whose knobby scalp and unshaven jaw sprouted a thin crop of dirty white bristles. He was not the cordial type of salesman. Indeed he seemed to bear some deep-seated grudge against customers.

"I'd like some gas—"

"You'll have to speak up, young fella. I'm a little hard o' hearin'."

"Gasoline," I said distinctly.

"Vaseline?" he rasped. "I guess I got a jar somewheres . . ." He moved away and fumbled under the counter.

Exasperated, I followed him, reached across a pile of cotton work gloves and rapped him on the head. "I said gasoline!" I shouted. "I want my tank filled, and I want some cigarettes, and I also want somebody with intelligence to tell me how to get to Chicago."

He glared at me indignantly. "You jest keep your hands to yourself, young fella. That's the Sheriff a-settin' back there, an' he don't go for you city toughs nohow."

A LONG, loose-jointed man with a weather-beaten face hoisted himself off a low box and lumbered toward us. He had a surprisingly high soprano voice.

"What's the trouble, Bert?" he inquired shrilly.

"This young fella here thinks he's tough—" Bert began.

"If you're the Sheriff, you can probably help me," I interrupted. "I got off the highway and lost my way. What's the quickest route to Chicago from here?"

"Chicago!"

"That's what I said."

"You're sure headed in a funny direction if that's where you aim to go,"

squeaked the Sheriff suspiciously. "Chicago's practically in the opposite direction. You better go back the way you come."

"Isn't there a quicker way than that?"

The Sheriff rubbed his long jaw, looked at his heavy boots, and glanced up at me quickly with small, hard blue eyes. I stared straight back at him.

"Oh, Bob," called Bert from behind the counter. "This fella wants his tank filled up. See to it, now. I'm busy."

Bob was the ancient creature with the corn cob pipe. Deliberately he removed it from his mouth and spat at the stove.

"Forty years," he said bitterly. "I been tryin' for forty years to teach him to take care o' things by hisself, so's I could get away for a spell. Dag me, if I think he's ever gonna learn."

He jabbed the pipe back into place, got up stiffly, and stamped out to the gas pump. Bert continued to lean on the counter, one hand cocked behind his ear as the Sheriff spoke.

"You take my advice," the Sheriff twittered, "an' go back the way you come. It's unhealthy around this neck o' the woods right now. An' unless you got some special business . . ."

His thin voice ended on a high questioning note and he continued to peer at me sharply.

"I've got some special business, all right," I said patiently. "In Chicago, tomorrow afternoon, and I don't want to have to drive all night to get there."

"Where'd you say you was comin' from?" he inquired nasally.

"I don't believe I mentioned it."

"Well—where was it?"

"Look here," I said, growing annoyed. "What do I have to do—submit a formal application and all my credentials in order to get some simple information?"

"That's about it," peeped the Sheriff obstinately.

The two remaining men had left the stove and moved up to the counter. I appeared to be surrounded, and they looked distinctly antagonistic. It occurred to me that this was some kind of hick racket.

"Very well," I said, hoping they wouldn't nick me too heavily. "My name is Walter Granger, Consulting Engineer, of New York City and Washington, D. C. I'm driving to Chicago from St. Louis. I haven't got my birth certificate with me, but possibly these items will confirm my identification." I slapped my wallet down on the counter and produced my driver's license and membership cards in a number of clubs and professional organizations. All four men leaned over the counter and inspected them carefully.

"Now that you know who I am," I said, "perhaps you will oblige me by introducing yourselves." I fully expected to have to contribute some cash to their racket, and I wanted to be able to include their names when and if I filed a complaint.

"Them papers *look* to be all right," squeaked the Sheriff cautiously. "What do you think, Happy?"

Happy was the wiry little man with a sharp nose and bright, black eyes. He looked like an alert sparrow.

"I'm Hapdorn Crowe," he said impressively. "I'm the State's Attorney. This," he indicated the hulking blond brute beside him, "is Ole Olsen, Deputy Sheriff. And that man is Fern Shaw, Sheriff of the County for the last seven years. He knows his business, and if he wants to ask questions—"

"My name's Albert Smith," Bert put in. "An' my brother's name's Robert Smith, an' we been deputized too, since we was robbed an' the same fella—"

"Bert!" thundered the State's Attor-

ney. "You be quiet!"

"That'll be two dollars an' fifty-seven cents, Mister, for the gas," panted old Robert Smith, bursting in the door with undue haste. "An' your—that lady—says for you to hurry on out."

I had kept my wallet out after replacing my identification papers, and now I counted out three dollars. "Give me a couple of packs of Camels and some matches for the balance," I directed Bert.

There was a silence as I pocketed the cigarettes. I looked around at the watchful faces. "Now if you gentlemen will be good enough to direct me to the shortest road to Chicago, I'll be on my way," I said.

The Sheriff spoke up in his odd falsetto. "I still think you'd best go back the way you come."

"All right!" I said with finality. "How much do you charge for information when a motorist gets lost in this backwoods settlement of yours?"

Sheriff Shaw reared up awkwardly, his face turning purple with rage. "Why you—" he squealed. "You goddam smart-alec!"

"I," said Attorney Crowe, "could have you indicted for trying to bribe a County Official. Before responsible witnesses, too. I—"

"Responsible, my foot!" I snorted. "I've never encountered such nit-wits in my life! You don't even know where Chicago is—much less how to get there. I should have known better than to waste my valuable time—" I slammed the door after me and felt the building shake with gratifying tremors.

SPLASHING through puddles, I dove into the car and jabbed the starter. The motor roared defiantly as I sent the car rocketing ahead over the greasy ruts that had formed where a narrower lane crossed the road. Suddenly I began to

laugh. The episode of the country store struck me as being very funny. Those small time officials were so serious, they were ridiculous.

Steffi, who had been completely quiet until this moment, moved closer to me and snuggled down comfortably. "When you are very angry," she said. "You always laugh. Why is that?"

"Me—angry?" I said in surprise. "Why, darling, I'm never angry."

"No-o?" There was a wise little lilt to her voice. "Then it is perhaps a good thing that you can pretend to be angry, and scowl like a demon. This is not the first time you have given me such a delicious fright."

"I think you are the one who is doing all the pretending, my pet," I said. "You have never been frightened of me, or anything else that I know of."

"Walter, I do not pretend to you," she said reproachfully. "Only to other people—like that inquisitive old man who put gas into the car. With him I have been very frank. Except that I did not tell him the truth. Thus I find out very much more than I tell."

"Oh, Lord!" I said helplessly. "What have you done now? What did you tell him?"

"What difference?" she inquired naively.

"Because they are the most suspicious individuals I've ever come across. And if you told one story, while I told an entirely different one . . . Well, we're liable to spend the night in the County klink."

"No, no. We shall spend the night with Aunt Sophie and Uncle Henry. That much I have told the old man, speaking very broken English, you understand? Thus, if I say the wrong thing, I can make a correction and explain that I do not express myself well in English."

"I see. And what else did you tell

him?"

"Very little. It was he who told me. For example, when I said that Uncle Henry was very important—prominent, he told me that my Uncle must be Henry Caldwell, the banker. Except that Henry Caldwell does not call his wife Sophie. She is named Marie."

"How did you get around that?"

"Very simply. I explained that her full name was Sophie Marie. Also that it was understandable that she has never mentioned me, her niece, since I have been detained in a concentration camp for years—for espionage. But that we are now en route to Chicago—"

"Steffi! They'll have the FBI after us!"

"*Mais, non.* I have given this impertinent old man to understand that I am no longer dangerous since you are my custodian. From that he concluded that you are an FBIG-Man, who will convey me to Chicago after a consultation with my Aunt Sophie and Uncle Henry."

"Oh, Lord!" I groaned again.

"Also," continued Steffi, "that we must come back to the point where his store is located in order to drive quickly to Chicago, and that—"

"What! You mean to say he actually told you that?" I demanded. "That we should have turned off on that muddy lane back there?"

"But, yes," said Steffi, wide-eyed. "Is that so astonishing? He said it was a—a quick-cut, a fast-cut—"

"A short-cut?"

"Yes, that is it. That is how we shall go tomorrow morning. But first you will find the house of Aunt Sophie where . . . Why are you stopping, Walter?"

THE car had struggled up a slippery rise, and I stopped and tried to look back the way we'd come. It was im-

possible to see anything through the curtain of rain, which was coming down now with more force and determination. Ahead the lights of the car slanted downward where the clay road dipped once more. The rain was rapidly turning the clay into treacherous grease, and I began to be a little uneasy about the situation.

"Walter," said Steffi softly, pushing her head under my arm. "Why are you troubled?"

"The road is very bad," I said as ominously as I could with the top of her head nuzzling my chin. "I think we must postpone the search for Aunt Sophie until after my business in Chicago is finished. Then we shall have more time. In this weather, it would be wiser to waste no more time in this neighborhood."

She untangled herself and moved away from me, sitting primly with both feet on the floor.

"I see," she said gravely, imitating me. "You do not wish to find the house of Aunt Sophie. It is as I thought. You are interested only in arriving at Chicago with your portfolio full of business. Me—I am nothing."

"Steffi, stop that!" I said guiltily. "You're making all that up out of your head. You know it isn't true."

She gazed at me mournfully, and her long hazel eyes were deep and dark in the delicate face. She looked so unbearably pathetic that I jerked my eyes away and stared straight ahead through the driving rain.

"Ah, yes. It is true," she murmured tragically. "I have suspected for some time that you no longer love me. That is why I thought of Aunt Sophie. To test you. To see which you considered first, your incomprehensible business or—"

"Or my incomprehensible wife," I said, and started the car.

She sat up abruptly as the car went slipping and sliding forward down the clay slope.

"Ah, bah! What the hell!" she said profanely. "What do I care for Aunt Sophie? Please, please. You must pay no attention to me. Walter, you must turn around! You must go back to Chicago at once—"

"Steffi, be still!" I said sharply. "This is dangerous. Keep your hands off the wheel! I can't turn around on this hill. Besides, I have no intention of turning around."

Which was perfectly true. Dimly, from the hilltop, the lights of the car had penetrated the glistening rain to pick up a turn-off heading northward away from the road. Chicago had to lie in that direction, and if I was lucky this turn-off would run parallel to the lane passing Smith Brother's store. The logical destination of both would seem to be the highway into Chicago.

I was not anxious to return to the intersection where the Smith Brothers and the County Officials were located. For some reason, they had not wanted me to use that short-cut. And I had an odd conviction that after discussing Steffi's wild tale, they would be pig-headed enough to try to prevent my reaching Chicago by any route.

STEFFI had subsided meekly and made no comment as I turned off the road. I was pleased to discover that the turn-off led to a narrow, graveled lane that promised much better driving. The downpour was steadily increasing, and the night was black.

It seemed to me the graveled lane did a good deal of unnecessary twisting and turning, but I was still congratulating myself on having discovered it when a large house loomed up ahead.

The lane, or driveway, branched at this point, one arm reaching toward a

large, old-fashioned brick stable; and the other shooting off to the side of the house and passing under a port-cochere. The house itself was a square, red brick mansion of the mid-Victorian type, with ornate and totally useless decorations spoiling its symmetry.

"Aunt Sophie," said Stephanie forlornly, "will be delighted to see us."

"You think so, do you?" I said, wondering if this private drive extended beyond the front of the house and if so, where it led.

I stopped the car under the port-cochere, and Stephanie said, "I am very unhappy."

"So am I," I replied. "I don't like the looks of this house. It seems to be closed up."

"Ah, yes," said Stephanie sadly. "Such would be my misfortune. I am already miserable because I have nagged you into coming here, and spoiled your plans. Now—there is nobody home. I am covered with confusion. I abase myself—"

"Here, here. Stop the melodrama, darling. This can't possibly be the house of your Aunt Sophie."

"But yes. I recognize it. It is the same."

"The same as what?"

"The same as the description and the little picture Aunt Sophie sent to me. Uncle Henry was born here."

"Nonsense. These old houses all look alike. Sit still, I'll get out and see if there's anybody home."

I mounted shallow stone steps leading to double glass doors and pushed a bell at one side. It was set in a brass plate and I noted the brass had been polished recently. I waited about sixty seconds and pushed the bell again. I could hear no sound except the steady pelting of rain on the slate roof. The shutters along this side of the house were all closed tightly. With a half-

dollar I tapped sharply on the glass, but nothing stirred.

The house might be closed, but it was certainly not deserted. The gravel drive was well-kept, the glass doors were clean, and the brass work polished; all evidence that some one had been taking care of the place. With the possibility of a caretaker in mind, I went back to the car and located the flashlight.

"You desire to enter the house?" inquired Stephanie with revived interest.

"I desire to find out where we are going," I replied, turning up my collar.

A brick walk led around to the rear of the house where a small wooden porch afforded some shelter from the soaking rain. But repeated pounding on the door brought no response whatever.

There was a loud crash of shattering glass from the side of the house, and I jumped off the porch running. As I turned the corner there was another, smaller crash and I fell headlong into a puddle.

"Steffi!" I yelled, swallowing mud, and trying to scramble back to the walk. "Steffi! Where—"

She appeared suddenly from the house, leaped like a gazelle, clearing the stone steps in one bound, and landing on one knee beside me in another.

"Walter, you are hurt? You are not hurt! You are hurt? Say you are not hurt!" Her arms were wound tightly about my neck, and she was kissing my muddy face.

"I am not hurt! I gasped. "For God's sake, let me up out of this—Steffi! Get away from me, I'm all wet!"

She released her grip, and I floundered out of the sticky pond and pulled her under the port-cochere. Luckily I had hung on to the flashlight. I wiped it on my trousers and turned the light on Steffi.

She was a sight. Her smart green ensemble was ruined and her small face was plastered with mud. Big eyes, wide with anxiety, stared at me out of the wreckage of a once beautiful woman.

"Steffi!" I said sternly. "Did you break that glass?"

"Oh, yes, yes." The anxiety gave way to glad relief. "I have opened all the doors. We can now go in."

"We can now get the hell away from here before we're pinched," I grated, still tasting mud. "There is a severe penalty for breaking and entering—"

"Poof! Aunt Sophie will not mind."

"Aunt Sophie," I said desperately, "has nothing whatever to do with this. I may as well admit it. We're lost. I haven't the slightest idea where we are, or whose house this is. Get into the car. We're going away from here. I can't afford to be locked up in jail while that Chicago conference is going on."

Steffi looked at me oddly, then turned around and marched back into the house. I stood there helplessly for all of a minute, realized I had no choice, and followed her.

THE glass door on the right had a large, jagged hole. Inside was a tiled vestibule littered with glass, and another door leading to the main hall. This door also had once had a glass pane in the upper half. Now, it too, was a jagged hole, and the door stood open. My tire jack lay just inside. Stephanie held a lighted match dangerously close to the wallpaper, and punched at a row of push-buttons.

"The lights," she said, "are broke. They do not light."

"That's encouraging," I muttered.

"Oh, so? You are being cheerful. No?"

"No," I said. "I'm being practical. If the electricity has been cut off, it

means the house has been closed up. And there's not likely to be anybody around to nab us."

"Very well, let us find out where is the bathroom. I wish to take a bath. Also, I am hungry. Also—"

"If the water hasn't been cut off," I said firmly, "we're going to wash up quickly, change our clothes, and get out of here."

The central hall was square, with a polished parquet floor, and small oriental rugs scattered about. There was a round, marble-topped table squarely in the center, under a huge, cut-glass chandelier. Small, straight-backed chairs with green plush upholstery were placed here and there along the walls. Double doors at either side were closed. Further back on the left was a stairway with intricately carved balustrade, and a wide landing half way up.

A doorway at the rear led to a narrow corridor, with a man's study opening off the left, and a dining room, hung with faded tapestries, on the right. The corridor ended in a spacious kitchen. I swung the flash around and found a high, old-style sink with a small pump at one end and brass faucets at the back. The faucets, when turned full on, emitted thin streams of rusty water.

Steffi thrust out a small, dirty palm and inspected the reddish fluid curiously.

"If I wash in red water, I shall be dyed red like an Indian, no?"

"No," I said. "The color doesn't come off. The pipes are rusty, but if we let the water run a while it will come out clear. This is spring water."

"And what is this ugly thing?" She jiggled the handle of the small pump.

"That's rain water. Much softer for washing purposes." I pumped vigorously, but the pump produced nothing more than complaining squeals. "It needs priming," I said. "The water

comes from a cistern."

"A cistern!" she crowed triumphantly. "And it does not work because it needs repairing. It is Aunt Sophie's cistern."

"All right, darling," I said tolerantly. "It is Aunt Sophie's cistern. It is Aunt Sophie's house. It is Aunt Sophie's night out, but she will be delighted to know that we stopped in to wash our faces. Meanwhile come out and hold the light for me while I get the bags out of the car."

The truth was, I doubted if Aunt Sophie existed at all outside of Steffi's imagination. By her own admission, she had used Aunt Sophie to test me. Furthermore she had never mentioned any such relative until after she had inveigled me to leave the highway, and follow that aimless road.

Steffi was full of such monkey tricks, and capable of acting them out with a good deal of realism. But she knew instinctively when the deception had gone far enough, and joyously confessed the trick with gales of infectious laughter.

Solemnly now she put up her muddy face to be kissed, and we went back to the large entrance hall. The rain sounded louder as I pushed open the outer doors.

"Be careful of that broken glass, dear," I said. "You might—"

Frantically I swung the flashlight back and forth along the streaming drive. My car had vanished.

STEFFI made a small explosive sound, as if she had held her breath for a long moment. "So!" she said viciously. "There is a thief here!"

"There *was* a thief here," I said and stepped down into the drive. I knew it was hopeless, but I searched the drive for some distance in both directions. I returned to the house much wetter, but no wiser.

Stephanie was pacing back and forth under the port-cochere, muttering malefictions. She whirled on me like a small fury with a mud pack on her face, and snarled, "I kill that—"

"Stop that!" I said wearily. "The catastrophe is bad enough without you bursting into gutter language. Go wash your face."

Instantly she was all laughter. "We are grotesque, no?" she bubbled, prancing like an imp and twirling on one foot. "It makes a *ballet comique*."

I pushed her firmly up the steps and into the house, but halted abruptly. The double doors on the right had been slid apart a few inches. I was sure they had been closed the first time we entered the house. Coming back from the kitchen I hadn't noticed them, so it was entirely possible that some one had been in the house when we entered, and had slipped out and borrowed my car to get away.

Taking no chances, however, I pulled Steffi back against the wall, switched off the light, and approached the opening from the side. I pointed the torch through the gap and switched it on suddenly. Nothing happened, so I slid the doors wide apart, and looked into the room. It was a sitting room furnished in the plush Victorian style that matched the house.

An archway with much fancy wood decoration led to a small music room, and that in turn led to the dining room. Stephanie had followed me into the room, and as I swept the flashlight across the mantel, she said, "Ha!"

"Ha—what?" I inquired.

"There, you see?" She grasped my arm and turned the light once more toward the fireplace. A fire had been laid in the grate and an unsightly kerosene can had been left there as if some one about to light the fire had suddenly been called away. Steffi directed the light

upward and it centered on a large oval chromo with lacy gilt frame. "Aunt Sophie!" she said triumphantly. "And Uncle Henry."

"Darling, are you kidding?"

She stamped her foot. "Is this a time for kidding? It is a catastrophe, no? Of course that is my Aunt Sophie. I would recognize her anywhere. And Uncle Henry's mustache."

The couple in the picture had assumed an odd pose. The man was seated on a bamboo chair and the woman stood beside him with one small hand pressed possessively on his shoulder. Either the man was very tall, or the woman was very small, because her head was only a fraction above his. Possibly that was the reason for the ungallant pose.

The man had a thick mane of hair, a flowing mustache and an amiable, lazy grin. The lady wore a frizzed bang and a grim look. Her stance and expression reminded me of the photograph of a doughty hunter posed with his kill.

I looked at Steffi dubiously, seeking some family resemblance, but flinched at the sight of her completely mud-smeared person.

"Dear Aunt Sophie!" said Steffi raptly.

"If you are convinced this is your Aunt Sophie's residence," I said, "perhaps you can borrow some of her clothes and clean yourself up—"

"But naturally. And for you also, we shall find something of Uncle Henry's. How fortunate we are that Aunt Sophie married him, and came here to live. It is comforting. No?"

"Oh, yes indeed," I said. "Even if it did cost us the car, all our baggage, and my highly confidential data on—" The flashlight had struck an old-fashioned desk, or *escritoire*, which was open, with papers scattered about and spilled on the floor. As hasty a job of ransacking as I ever saw.

THERE were letters, receipts, cancelled bills, an estimate for foundation repairs—nothing of value that I could see. Apparently the desk had not been forced. Whoever opened it must have had a key. They also had dirty hands. There were greasy fingerprints smeared everywhere. It was Steffi who found the ten dollar bill on the floor.

"This thief," she said thoughtfully, "he is very careless. Not like a professional at all. I think we shall catch him."

"Oh, Lord!" I groaned. "That reminds me, I'll have to notify that silly Sheriff. I wonder if there's a telephone."

There was, in an alcove under the stairs, but it was dead.

"We are stuck, no?" said Steffi blithely.

"We are stuck, yes," I said, looking at the broken doors.

The rain which had started so gently, was now coming down in a steady roar and a damp chill was creeping into the house. In some way I would have to make those door secure, not only against the weather, but in the event any other intruders planned to visit the house.

My first concern, however, was lights. The single flashlight was not only inadequate, but it might burn out at any moment. I remembered the can of kerosene, and in a closet off the kitchen I found two kerosene lanterns. Fortunately the can was full, so the prospect of spending the night in strange darkness was eliminated. The lanterns were smoky and dim and very odorous, but better than a total blackout.

My next chore was in the cellar, where I built a good fire in the furnace in order to get hot water, while Steffi explored the pantry. Stacked under the cellar stairs I found storm doors and

windows, and that solved the problem of the shattered entrance. Two heavy wooden doors with hinges attached fitted tightly outside the glass doors, and were fastened with an iron bolt. Putting them up was no easy job, but once they were in place I felt a little better—though still far from comfortable. It seemed to me the house was a gloomy place, full of shadows. I tried to blame this on our poor lighting equipment, but the feeling of discomfort persisted.

The house had only one old-fashioned bathroom at the end of the upstairs hall. I bathed first while the water was still tepid and very rusty. Judging from the amount of rust accumulated, the water could not have been used for several days.

I puzzled over this, but couldn't decide whether it was good or bad. Whether it meant that Aunt Sophie and Uncle Henry had gone away for an extended trip, or whether they might be expected back at any moment. It would take a good deal of explaining to convince any householder that I was sitting in his bathtub because I was an innocent victim of circumstances, and the robbery was merely coincidental.

Fortunately, there were plenty of towels and soap in a tall, built-in cupboard. I dried myself quickly, washed the mud and rust out of the high, iron tub, and started the water for Steffi.

DRAPED somewhat rakishly in two bath towels, I stepped into a rear bedroom where Steffi had unearthed a bizarre costume for me. It consisted of a silk and wool union suit, gray checked coat and trousers of ancient cut and a silk shirt with red and green candy stripes and no collar. The union suit and the shirt had yellowed with age, but the most striking thing about the outfit was its size. This unusual ap-

parel had evidently been constructed for a giant. There was also a huge pair of red leather slippers.

Steffi had partially cleaned her face, twisted her copper hair into a gleaming topknot, and wore a becoming ruffled robe of soft print. She inspected me curiously, one finger poking at her cheek.

"How is it," she inquired, "that it did not stain you, the red color?"

"Darling, I told you, the water is merely rusty—the color does not come off."

"I think sometimes, yes," she insisted. "In Aunt Sophie's room it is all rusty where she has been sleeping." She executed a graceful *tour jetter* toward the bathroom, landing on one foot poised like a butterfly. "I also shall become rusty," she said gayly. "It will be amusing. No?"

"No," I said, contemplating the super union suit, and wondering if it would not be more practical to wash and dry my own underwear.

In the bathroom Steffi sang soulfully in French, breaking off now and then to express herself on the subject of "these maladroït bathroom fixtures."

I proceeded to envelop myself in Uncle Henry's voluminous garments. No half-pint myself, I decided that Uncle Henry must be nearly seven feet tall with a physique to match. I earnestly hoped that he was not expected home any time soon.

This thought led to the observation that he couldn't have been home for a good many years if this particular costume was a sample of the wardrobe he had left. These were clothes a man might have worn a quarter of a century ago, and they had the appearance of things that had been stored away unused for a long time. They were discolored, musty rusty . . .

I paused in the act of rolling up a

trouser leg. Rusty? What was the riddle of the rust, in this house which appeared to have been lived in so recently? Steffi had said it was rusty where Aunt Sophie slept. I caught myself staring apprehensively at the massive wooden bed where Uncle Henry supposedly took his rest.

Shrugging off the eerie feeling, I strode over to the bed, lifted the fat bolster and tore back the bedclothes. The linen was clean and neatly tucked in, but it had obviously been used not long ago. There were toilet articles on the dresser, a large silk dressing gown on the back of the closet door, but nothing whatever in the closet.

A heavy, black walnut chest of drawers, however, disclosed the source of my ample costume. The clothes had evidently been neatly packed with layers of tissue paper until Steffi had rummaged through it. Everything had the same disused appearance, and the puzzle was growing by the minute. If Uncle Henry had died years ago, his clothes might have been packed away like this. But if he was dead, who had been using his bed?

I picked up my flashlight and went along the hall to the front bedroom. Feminine apparel was strewn about on the furniture and trailing on the flowered carpet. I recognized more of Steffi's rummaging. The graceful old four-poster bed had a flowered canopy to match the carpet. The bedclothes were tumbled, and I stood rooted to the spot with a sickening chill in the pit of my stomach.

The dark rust-colored stains were eloquent . . . of horror, mutilation, death. . . . Of violent murder . . .

I COULD hear Steffi splashing and singing to herself. The old house seemed to be holding its breath and listening with me, evilly expectant now

that I had uncovered its ugly secret. Outside the wind had risen, thrashing the trees and driving the rain spasmodically against the shuttered windows.

Somewhere in the dark downstairs there was a loud crack, and the tension flowed out of me, leaving me limp and sweating. One thing was uppermost in my mind—to get away from this cursed house. All the rest of the disconnected puzzle was unimportant, and I had no compunction about running away from it.

I was not concerned in the strange and dreadful crimes that had taken place here. I had stumbled upon the scene by accident, and if I left hurriedly with Steffi, the main action and circumstances of the tragedy would not be affected. We had no business here and no part in what had or was taking place.

Sheriff Fern Shaw was not so silly after all. This, then, was his reason for keeping traffic off that side lane which must pass somewhere close to the house.

Apparently everything in the house had been left as it was when the murder was discovered, like a bit of unfinished business. And there could be only one reason for the Sheriff's presence at the Smith Brothers' store—so near the scene of the crime. *The murderer had not been caught.*

That was what old Bert Smith had been about to tell me when State's Attorney Crowe had shut him up. The Smith brothers had been robbed and the same fellow . . .

The same fellow obviously was suspected of this murder. Therefore our burglar might have been the murderer returned, and now pushing my car through the stormy night to safety. If so, how had he arrived at the house?

Possibly on foot from some hiding

place nearby. Certainly there was no sign of a car outside the house. However, if everything had been left as it was, while the Sheriff hunted down the murderer, there must be a car of some sort in the stable-garage. Where in this gloomy old house would the car keys be kept?

Perhaps the burglar had them. He must have had keys to open the house and the rifled desk, which would not stay closed unless it was locked. He must have been familiar with the place. Perhaps it was he who had slept in the back bedroom. Then who had made the bed up so carefully? Who was this burglar-murderer? Who . . .

Suddenly I remembered that though these people were utter strangers to me, and could be considered with a certain detachment, they were Steffi's relatives. I must, at all cost, keep the shocking knowledge from her until we had gotten far away from this place. And the sooner, the better.

Would it be safe to leave Steffi alone in the house while I explored the stable? Ridiculous to drag her out in this weather . . .

I became aware once more of the separate sounds of the storm: the big tree whining from the whipping, the old house creaking under the savage slashes of rain, and instantly I was aware of an alien sound.

The loud crack I had heard some time previously was being repeated at regular intervals, and it was not a part of the storm. It was a deliberate sound made by some other force with deliberate intent. It was the sound of wood being pried and force apart.

I looked wildly about the feminine bedroom for a weapon of some sort. There was nothing, except the flashlight which I held in a shaking hand. I snapped it off and made my way in the dark toward the head of the stairs.

There was a musty, damp smell in the closed house, seasoned by the acrid stench of the kerosene lanterns, one in the bathroom and one in the rear bedroom. I could no longer hear Steffi's light voice over the beat of the storm. Nor was there any distinguishable sound from downstairs.

THE stairs were well-built and gave no betraying creaks as I started feeling my way cautiously downward. It was Uncle Henry's damnable wardrobe that defeated me. I stepped on a dragging pants leg, tried to recover my footing, and tripped helplessly on the monstrous red slippers, losing them entirely.

The wide landing stopped my hasty descent, but the damage was already done. The last thing I remembered was the loud thumping sounds I made on the steps. I was only partially knocked out, but caught myself uttering a loud groan as I recovered my battered wits.

After that it was useless to try to conceal my progress. Common sense told me that since no one had rushed to attack me, the intruder was equally anxious to avoid combat.

I switched on my flashlight and examined the lower floor thoroughly. Once again the old house had presented me with a puzzle. Neither the kitchen door, nor the storm doors at the front, all securely bolted from the inside, appeared to have been tampered with. None of the shutters showed any signs of having been forced. The door leading to the cellar stairs was also locked, with the key still in place. Yet I was sure those cracking, splintering sounds had not been merely a manifestation of the storm.

Steffi called brightly from upstairs and I went back up slowly, and somewhat painfully, trying to compose my-

self. It was not so difficult to conceal my alarm from her, however. She was in the rear bedroom, intent upon cutting bangs and frizzing them with a comb to look like Aunt Sophie's hair-dress.

"What in God's name are you doing to yourself?" I demanded harshly. "Put some clothes on. We've got to get out of here at once."

She looked at me over her shoulder and laughed. "Walter, you have lost yourself! How shall I ever find you in those clothes?"

"Never mind that!" I snapped nervously. "Come along—"

"Why are you in such a great hurry—and in this storm?" She turned about and gazed at me wide-eyed. "Walter . . . there is nothing wrong, is there?"

"No, no. Of course not, but we must be on our way—"

"In good time. But first we shall eat something. Me, I am famished. And in the kitchen I have found coffee and flour and many cans full of things." She pulled the print robe on and started for the stairs with a lantern. "I shall make biscuits," she said happily.

Hastily I put on my own damp socks and shoes and followed her. All the while she was busily clattering pans and slamming the oven door, I prowled the house, examining doors and windows.

"Why are you so restless?" Steffi asked. "You are hungry, no?"

"No!" I said. "I mean—yes! Yes, of course I'm hungry. But I am also concerned about this storm. I'm afraid it will—er—rain in, and spoil the drapes or rugs or something."

"Ah, you are always the careful one," murmured Steffi fondly. "They will appreciate you—Aunt Sophie and Uncle Henry."

I shuddered quietly and wondered

where Aunt Sophie and Uncle Henry were at that moment.

Somehow I made a pretense of eating the meal Steffi put on the kitchen table. She had seasoned a can of beans with tomatoes, bacon, molasses and several other things and baked them, along with fluffy biscuits. I drank three cups of strong, black coffee, and made the rounds of the house once more.

When I returned to the kitchen, Steffi was yawning and eyeing the soiled dishes with an obvious lack of enthusiasm.

"Let the dishes go, dear," I said urgently. "It's time we got started."

She broke off a delicate yawn to stare at me in disbelief. "You have suddenly become quite mad," she said with conviction. "This obsession to arrive at Chicago has, I think, unbalanced you. Do you propose that we shall walk in this unholy storm? Here we are warm and safe. Here we shall sleep."

THE argument did not last long, but at least I gained one point. We did not use either of the beds upstairs. The double doors on the left of the foyer led to a large and rather formal drawing room, with only the one entrance. Using clean blankets from the linen closet, Steffi made herself fairly comfortable on a massive divan, and I lay down beside her after extinguishing the odorous lanterns.

Steffi sighed blissfully and drifted into untroubled sleep, while I stared at the darkness and listened tensely.

My first panic had given way to more sensible thinking. Certainly it would have been foolish to go rushing out into the storm in the hope of finding a usable car in the stable. If anyone were lurking about the old house, the stable would be the very place he would hide. Waiting his chance to break into

the house.

What was he after? Was it the same intruder who had already rifled the old desk, and fled in my car? Were there perhaps more than one—working together or separately?

There was a stirring and creaking throughout the old house. The sliding doors to the drawing room had been closed, but they rattled briefly in their grooves, as though a strong draft of air had swept through the house. And I knew that our unwelcome visitor was back. Something, or some one had entered the house.

This time I felt no sudden panic. I was becoming conditioned to the strange intrusions. Slowly and cautiously I eased myself to the floor and picked up my flashlight and a heavy brass poker. Steffi had not moved as I made my way toward the sliding doors. I inched them apart carefully and smelled the damp draft of air that came from some opening. There was a faint bump from the dining room as though some one had collided with a piece of furniture. The visitor at least had form and substance. I gripped the poker tighter and squeezed through the doors into the foyer.

Now I could hear sounds of stealthy movement, approaching through the small music room and the sitting room on the opposite side of the foyer.

I crossed in the dark to the sitting room doors, raised the poker and waited.

Steffi spoke suddenly from the drawing room behind me. Her voice was sleepy, but her words shocked me. "Walter," she said, "your hands are so cold . . ."

Things happened with speed and confusion after that. I know that I yelled and leaped across the foyer, overturning the marble-topped table. Something damp and clammy rushed

at me as I entered the drawing room and I struck with the poker. There was a shrill scream and I tangled with a falling body, and we both went down. A wet octopus fell on my back and grappled with me, and I was vaguely aware of running feet that seemed to be coming from all directions. Panting and struggling to free myself, I kept listening for some sound from Steffi—wondering desperately what had happened to her.

Lights flashed on from two directions, something struck me a sharp blow behind the ear, and I slumped down on hands and knees, shaking my head blearily.

There was a shattering sound and a loud grunt directly above me, followed by the tinkling fall of broken china. Steffi in full voice was shouting Russian curses at my assailant, and following up with more expertly aimed missiles.

I sat down suddenly and stared at Sheriff Fern Shaw who was sitting beside me on the floor, nursing a bleeding head. The shrill scream had undoubtedly come from him. The rest of his cohorts were busy ducking behind furniture as Steffi kept up her barrage.

I recognized the bird-like face of State's Attorney Happy Crowe, popping up and down behind a brocade chair, as he tried to remonstrate with an infuriated Steffi. Crouched in the shelter of a chest of drawers was the ungainly figure of Deputy Sheriff Ole Olsen; and an ornate table sheltered two husky highway police.

"It's him!" gasped Deputy Olsen. "Him an' that foreign lady . . ."

SHERIFF SHAW stood over the kitchen sink and pressed a wet towel on his bruised head. He peered at me balefully out of one eye.

"I arrest you," he shrilled, "on suspicion of murder, robbery, false identi-

fication, and impersonating a Federal officer."

"Who says I impersonated a Federal officer?" I demanded indignantly from under the dripping towel Steffi was applying to my head.

"Your wife," retorted the Sheriff. "Accordin' to what she told Bob Smith this afternoon, you was passin' yourself off as an FBI man, and claimin' to be related to banker Henry Caldwell. The FBI nor Henry Caldwell, neither one, never heard of you."

I managed to escape from the kitchen chair and Steffi's drenching ministrations. With water running down my face and the back of my neck, I sputtered, "You crazy fool! I gave you proof of my identity—"

"You showed us the papers of one Walter Granger," said Happy Crowe, fluffing himself like an angry bird. "We have reason to think those papers were stolen and that Walter Granger is dead. We have so reported to his Washington headquarters, and they are co-operating with us in an effort to trace his movements—and locate the body."

I stared at him aghast. The two uniformed troopers towered, one on either side of him, their hands ominously near their guns.

"Bodies," said Deputy Olsen cryptically from the background. "There's more 'n one. I heard poundin' an' groanin' when I was here before."

"You clodhopper!" squealed the Sheriff. "I told you that wasn't no spook. You shoulda investigated like I told you, instead of tearin' all the way back to Smith Brothers', yellin' about haunts. Now git on outa here an' look for that body!"

Deputy Olsen shuffled his feet and glanced hopefully at the troopers. They were, however, concentrating their attention on me.

"Just a moment, gentlemen," said Stephanie in perfectly good English. She can, when she wishes, assume a regal dignity that is a little terrifying. "By what right do you force your way into this house and attack my husband and me in our beds?"

They stared at her in astonishment and the Sheriff piped, "I guess, ma'am, you don't know whose house this is."

"It is the house," said Stephanie coldly, "of my Aunt Sophie. When we arrived there was a burglar in the house. He has stolen our car and escaped. But have you idiots apprehended him? No! Instead you heap insult and injury upon the head of my poor husband. I regret that I must ask you to leave this house at once. You will have much to answer for when my Aunt Sophie returns. I shall see to it that she enters grave charges against you."

"If you mean the lady that used to live here," squeaked the Sheriff, "she won't be back, she—"

"Shut up, you fool!" I snapped. "Can't you see that she doesn't know anything about—anything?"

"That could be," said Happy Crowe, eyeing Stephanie approvingly. "The little lady has obviously been deceived from the beginning by this—this rogue. She was told that she would be taken to the home of relatives. Had you ever visited this home before, my dear?"

"But no," said Steffi warily.

"There, you see?" beamed Attorney Crowe. "She didn't know where she was going, but she believed this man. The so-called 'burglar' was obviously his accomplice, who was already on the scene, having broken down the doors —"

STEFFI interrupted him with tinkling laughter, and flung out her arms in amusement. "They are delight-

ful, these people," she declared. "They are all quite mad. No?"

"No," I said bitterly, pulling up Uncle Henry's sagging trousers. "Merely morons. Nevertheless they are capable of holding me for my own murder, and preventing me from reaching that Chicago conference, and throwing my whole organization into an uproar by pronouncing me dead."

"But that is absurd!" said Steffi angrily. "They can see that you are alive. Yes?"

"Yes. But they don't believe it," I said callously. "I am now officially dead, and you are a widow."

Shrieking like a calliope, Steffi threw herself at me, and proceeded to tear Uncle Henry's silk shirt to shreds while she beat on the floor with her heels. It was, as I had anticipated, one of her better tantrums. If it did nothing else, I thought it would at least convince these dolts that I was Walter Granger and that my wife would not be here if I were dead.

It lasted for all of fifteen minutes, and I had my hands full. After standing there goggle-eyed for the first few minutes, the helpless males began to pace the floor, occasionally bumping into each other.

Somewhere in the middle of it I heard sharp pounding at the front entrance. Eventually somebody, I think it was one of the troopers, went to unbolt the storm doors. A blustery little man with sleek, gray hair and a red face, came in bellowing: "Where's that dirty rapscallion? Claiming me as an uncle, and smashing his way into this house—"

At this point he was drowned out by Steffi's renewed efforts, and had to stand back while Steffi went on with her solo. The two gaunt Smith brothers had followed him rather timidly into the kitchen. They backed up against the wall, their faces screwed up pain-

fully in awed disbelief at the spectacle.

I decided then that they were both bachelors. The other, more experienced men, were simply waiting it out, like passengers on a stalled train which they knew would start up again as soon as the obstacle had been removed.

When Steffi had reduced herself to mere strangling noises, I began to reason with her. "Which would you prefer, darling?" I said soothingly. "To have me dead, or to have Aunt Sophie dead?"

It was not logical, of course, but it was the only kind of reasoning that appealed to her.

"No, no!" she sobbed. "I will not have anybody dead."

"But somebody has to be dead," I insisted. "These men have already decided that. Which shall it be—Aunt Sophie or me?"

"They are g-ghouls! N—honk—no?" she asked pitifully.

"That's putting it mildly. Do you think you could bear to part with Aunt Sophie?"

Steffi looked around at them curiously with tear-bright eyes. "Very well," she said in a small voice. "Let them have Aunt Sophie."

THERE was a collective sigh of relief, and then the Sheriff's falsetto broke in querulously.

"That ain't gonna solve our problem of who killed who, an' how many," he said.

"All right," said Attorney Crowe, once more assuming command. "But it does solve the problem of breaking the sad news about her hypothetical aunt to this poor, misguided child. Although I must say," he frowned at me menacingly, "the method was a bit drastic."

"Is this my—er—niece?" inquired the blustery little man, no longer bel-

lowing.

"So she was led to believe, Mr. Caldwell," said Happy Crowe. "Also that she would find her aunt and uncle in this house."

"Great Scott!" said banker Caldwell. "That proves the fellow's a fake. But what the devil did he want in the Peterson house?"

"That, among other things, has yet to be explained," said Happy Crowe. "Meanwhile the little lady has had rather a bad time of it. She is—er—distraught. I suggest that she—er—clothe herself suitably while we—Harph! While we continue this investigation."

I suddenly realized the cause of the State's Attorney's confusion. Also the fascinated silence on the part of the rest of our audience. One of Steffi's long, exquisite legs had escaped from the ruffled folds of the print robe, and she was quite innocently unaware of the effect it was having. Steffi's backstage ideas of proper clothing were somewhat less than those of her present audience.

I reached down and yanked the robe into place. "Your clothes must be dry by this time," I said angrily. "Go upstairs and get dressed. We may be leaving here."

"But you also, Walter," she giggled, flipping the tatters of Uncle Henry's shirt. "In this costume you are sinister."

"He is indeed," quoth Attorney Crowe.

"Brutal, no?" said Steffi, surveying me appreciatively. "Vicious! *Un type louche*—"

"Steffi!" When she called me a crook, I decided her description had gone far enough. "Upstairs!" I said emphatically, handing her one of the kerosene lanterns and pushing her toward the hallway. "I'll be along directly."

"Ha!" said Steffi, stopping abruptly near the dazed Smith brothers, and wrinkling up her nose. "These are the burglar. You smell it?"

"Smell what?"

"This kerosene. It is the same as we find in the living room. No?"

"Yes," I said. "It is undoubtedly the same. But they smell like this all the time. They sell the stuff."

"Oh, so?" Steffi scrutinized the frightened old men with narrowed eyes. "I think they must also bathe in it. If you touch a match, they will light up like the lanterns. They," she concluded, tripping airily down the hall, "are also mad."

"He had an accomplice, of course," Happy Crowe was explaining to Mr. Caldwell, as the troopers watchfully closed in and herded me back into the kitchen. "The late Walter Granger's car is now being driven somewhere by that accomplice, whose identity we have not yet determined."

Mr. Caldwell pushed his chin far to one side and eyed me as if I had just asked for a renewal on a second mortgage.

"I—ah—have some ideas about this unknown accomplice," he said portentously, "which I have wanted to discuss with you, Happy. But first I examined the records to verify my—you might call it a hunch."

"Yes, Mr. Caldwell?" said Happy Crowe eagerly.

"You were quite young at the time," said the banker. "But you may recall that twenty-three years ago Mrs. Peterson's husband was supposed to have died in a Chicago hospital, to which she had removed him. It was well known that Peterson was a heavy drinker and persistent hell-raiser, and it was generally believed that his dissipation had caused his death. The estate naturally went to Mrs. Peterson. She

had presented adequate proof of death. I now think," said Mr. Caldwell dramatically, "that proof was false!"

I PULLED up Uncle Henry Peterson's trousers and sat down on a kitchen chair, while the rest of his listeners recovered from the shock of banker Caldwell's words. Having seen Aunt Sophie Peterson's grim-faced picture, I was not at all surprised.

"You mean," demanded Happy Crowe, "that he returned—"

"Exactly that," said Mr. Caldwell. "I think I know where he spent the past twenty-three years, and why he was finally allowed to leave. Immediately after his supposed death, Mrs. Peterson began making regular semi-annual payments to a private sanatorium in Wisconsin. The payments, over a period of twenty-three years, amounted to a considerable sum. At the same time the estate was dwindling. I now hold a first mortgage on this property. But in spite of all advice to the contrary, Mrs. Peterson insisted upon making these regular contributions to the sanatorium. Recently she came to me requesting a second mortgage. I was forced to refuse."

"Ah," said Attorney Crowe, his sharp nose twitching. "When she was unable to continue the payments, they released him."

"Exactly," said Mr. Caldwell. "Released him to wreak his vengeance on the woman who had kept him imprisoned for twenty-three years. That is the identity of one criminal. I regret that I cannot help you with this one."

BANKER Caldwell glared at me coldly. They all glared at me, and for some idiotic reason I wanted to laugh. I also wanted to punch a few heads. If I didn't get on the phone soon, and assure the Washington of-

fice that my death had been miscalculated, my obituary would appear in the morning papers.

"I knew he was a tough one, first time I seen him," remarked lanky Bert Smith, his animosity unabated.

"I didn't care for you either," I retorted. "In fact you're the cause of my getting mixed up in this fool business."

"Mel" he squalled, bending his knees and thumping his chest for emphasis. "Why I ain't been near this place. I was off deliverin' Mrs. Klingfelder's order—"

"I'm talking about your disagreeable disposition," I said critically. "If you'd learn to wait on customers without antagonizing them, there'd be no after-effects like this, and no damage done."

"By the way," said banker Caldwell to the room at large. "Since this is now virtually my property, I must insist upon reimbursement for any damage done. The front doors were smashed by the culprits, and I suppose you fellows smashed your way in somewhere else?"

"It was unavoidable," said Attorney Crowe apologetically. "Sheriff Shaw had—inadvertently, lost the ring of keys belonging to the house. When they were finally found at the store, he sent Deputy Olsen to the house to make the regular inspection which we have maintained since the crime was discovered. Deputy Olsen arrived to find that the storm doors had been put in place and securely bolted. The kitchen door was also bolted. He then made his way around to the side of the house, where a small door, which formerly led from the dining room to the garden, had been boarded up and was no longer in use. It was concealed by a large tapestry."

Happy Crowe paused, and Deputy Olsen looked sheepish. Mercifully, the

State's Attorney skipped over the details of the Deputy's mad flight after hearing me fall down the stairs.

"It was necessary for us to use that dining room door to gain admittance," he said.

Banker Caldwell went to inspect the dining room door, and promptly started bellowing: "Who the devil left this door open? The dining room is flooded! The floors—"

Agonized screams came from upstairs, and I knocked down two men getting out of the kitchen.

Steffi was standing in the middle of the front bedroom, uttering shrieks at the ceiling. She was dressed in an old-fashioned ball gown of deep blue, and clutched a pink parasol in one hand.

Unable to determine the cause of her anguish, I grabbed her and shook her, not too gently.

"Steffi, be still!" I shouted. "How can I find out what's wrong—"

She made stabbing motions with the parasol toward the stained bed, and pointed with the other hand at a heavy old bureau. A carved wooden box had been opened and letters were scattered over the top of the bureau.

"But you knew!" I shouted above her wailing. "I told you she was dead!"

Steffi gasped and subsided. "But I did not yet weep for her, until now," she explained limply. "I think that nobody has wept for her. Poor Julia..."

"Julia! I thought her name was Sophie!"

"No, no. It is not the same. This one is named Julia, but I have wept for her." She opened the pink parasol and paraded nonchalantly toward the mirror.

I LOOKED helplessly toward the equally bewildered males peering in the door. Obviously it was up to me to assert my authority. I followed Steph-

anie and jerked the bit of pink fluff out of her hand.

"You will now," I said sternly, "explain yourself. Didn't you tell me you recognized your Aunt Sophie's picture downstairs?"

"But yes," she admitted naively. "Only I have made a mistake. It is nothing."

"How could you make a mistake? You must know what your Aunt Sophie looks like!"

"But no. How could I?" she shrugged bare shoulders expressively. "I have never seen her."

"Steffi, dear," I said gently. "I have never spanked a wife, but I think—the time—has come—"

"Very well," she said practically, glancing over her shoulder toward the door. "You will please ask them to leave."

"Gentlemen," I said formally. "If you will excuse me, I should like to beat my wife privately."

"Here, here," said Attorney Crowe, advancing one foot into the room. "None of that now. It appears the little lady is—er—suffering from delusions of some sort. Possibly," he said in a stronger voice, "brought on by mistreatment—"

"Sheriff! Sheriff! Hey, Fern, come down here quick!" yelled Deputy Olsen excitedly from below. "I found it. It come up outa the cistern—"

Sheriff Shaw hesitated only briefly. "Bring him along!" he shrilled at the troopers, and I was ushered willy-nilly down the stairs.

What Deputy Olsen had found was the ghastly, bloated body of a large old man. He had been dead for several days.

The corpse was carried into the kitchen and lay in a spreading pool of water. It was evident that he had been blasted out of existence with a shotgun,

aimed at his face which was now a blackened pulp. It was also evident that he had been dumped into the cistern, and the heavy rainfall had caused it to overflow, bring his body to the top.

The discovery was made when Deputy Olsen and the two Smith brothers had apparently run in the opposite direction when Steffi started screaming.

"Let's—get out of here," said Mr. Caldwell sickly. He led the way into the living room where he mopped his brow with unnecessary vigor and stared up at the chromo over the mantel.

"I'm pretty sure," he said in a flat voice, "that it—that body—is Pete Peterson. So it couldn't have been Peterson who drove away from this house tonight."

"Wouldn't been likely he'd bust in his own doors, anyway," said the Sheriff in high voice. "Musta been in the house before she was killed. Stands to reason he'd of had keys—"

The keys did it. I had been so concerned with my own problems, I had paid little attention to the puzzle which had caused my difficulties. Now suddenly, things began to click rapidly into place. The Sheriff's keys had been lost or mislaid in the Smith Brothers' store before I arrived. That was the lost "ring" they were arguing about when I came in. Soon after that somebody had left the store with the keys, and arrived at the house before I did. After escaping in my car the person had returned to the store and placed the keys where they were later found. My car then, must be hidden somewhere in the neighborhood . . . And one of those men in the store was guilty—of robbery and car theft, if not murder.

"Mr. Caldwell," I addressed the disheartened banker sharply. "My car was stolen from outside this house tonight, and I intend to notify the proper authorities and recover it. I think it is

somewhere in this neighborhood. And I'm positive that one of these men took it."

"Why you—" squealed the Sheriff. "You crook!"

I IGNORED everybody but the banker who was staring at me from under lowered brows. "I will now prove my statement," I said confidently. "One of these men left the store shortly after I had stopped there. He had obtained the Sheriff's keys—or rather, the keys to the house which the Sheriff had in his possession."

"Did not!" squeaked the sheriff. "I found the keys right in the store where I'd dropped 'em. An' the only fella that left the store was Bert Smith there. He had a phone order from Mrs. Klingfelder, an' he went off to deliver it."

"Yes," I said agreeably. "And the order included a can of kerosene which was brought to this house for the purpose of destroying something. The kerosene was to insure quick and thorough burning. You can see the ring there on the hearthstone where the can was set down. You can also see the greasy fingerprints all over the desk and papers where he was searching for something. The can slopped over and if you threw a lighted match at Bert Smith, he'd probably go up in flames."

"Fella's a liar," said Bert Smith morosely.

"Wait a minute," said Mr. Caldwell in a strange voice. "I happen to know that Mrs. Klingfelder hasn't been home for two days. Her daughter-in-law is—er—expecting, and Mrs. Klingfelder has gone to her son's house . . ."

"Thank you, sir," I said quickly. "Just let me ask you one question. Who told you I was in this house, and that I had broken the glass doors?"

"What's that?" He was still trying to adjust his thoughts in the methodical

order he was accustomed to.

"When you entered this house to-night," I explained carefully, "you said something about me being here. You expected to find me, and you also knew that I had broken the doors. Who told you that?"

The banker arched his brows and looked at Bert Smith. "Why you told me, didn't you, Bert?"

"Don't recall as I did," said Bert harshly. "There was considerable excitement an' rantin' around—"

"Only one person could have known that I was in the house, after breaking the doors," I said tautly. "That's the man who was already in the house, having used the Sheriff's borrowed keys. When my wife and I went back to the kitchen he ran out the front door, drove my car to a spot nearby, where he could pick it up again if he wanted to make a quick get-away; but in any case to prevent my leaving here until I had been arrested for his crimes. Then he returned and drove his own car back to the store."

"Seems like," squeaked the Sheriff petulantly, "you're twistin' things around to suit yourself. You ain't actually provin' nothin'. Not to me anyhow."

"Let's—ah—let's try to look at this thing calmly," said Attorney Crowe. "I—ah—I don't like to be hasty in these —"

"This is a fine time to arrive at that decision," I said. "After brow-beating and threatening me all night. To say nothing of interfering with my legitimate business, and sending out false rumors of my premature death."

"Now, now," chirped Happy Crowe unhappily. "Let's be calm about this. In the first place, the Smith brothers themselves, were victims of a robbery—nearly five hundred dollars in cash."

"I'm willing to bet they had never

been robbed before," I snapped. "They probably kept their money so well hidden, only they could find it—"

"Looky here," quavered old Bob Smith. "Bert, he's a careless cuss, and not much account in the store, but he ain't a-goin' around robbin' people—especially his own self."

"I think he took the money," I said, "to keep Peterson in the sanatorium. But Peterson arrived home before the money was sent off, so Bert Smith came back to the house tonight to recover the money, and probably to destroy any evidence that connected him with the Petersons—"

"Bert, you speak up now," ordered old Bob Smith. "This here fella's gettin' me all mixed up. I declare, I don't know what to think."

"That's right, you damn old hypocrite!" spat Bert savagely. "Now you turn on me! I've stood just about enough from you—" His lanky arm shot out viciously, and a gnarled fist caught old Bob Smith on the side of the jaw. He collapsed like a bundle of dry straw, and in the midst of the trampling confusion and swearing that followed, Stephanie sauntered into the room. She looked on coolly as the battle subsided, and Bert Smith was held panting between the two husky troopers.

"Leave me go, now," he gasped. "I never done nothin'—I never—" He broke off and stared wildly at Stephanie.

She had thrown a lace shawl artfully about her bare shoulders, and she carried the carved box in one arm.

"They should be ashamed, these men," said Steffi reproachfully. "Fighting in this house where poor Julia has died. He killed her, that man," she said sadly, looking up at the chromo. "After twenty-three years, he came back and killed her. It is all in this

box."

Bert Smith sagged suddenly with the weariest groans I had ever heard.

IT WAS, as Steffi had said, all in the box. Letters from the private sanatorium over the years, urging that Pete Peterson be allowed to come home since he was normal in every way. And if he had ever threatened the life of his wife, there was certainly no longer any danger.

A copy of the commitment papers were also in the box. They had been signed by Julia Peterson and witnessed by Bert Smith.

When he was shown his own signature on the papers, Bert Smith went to pieces and blurted out the whole tragic story.

"He was drinkin'—Pete Peterson was," he panted hoarsely. "An' this fella come to see him, to collect a debt. A gamblin' debt it was, an' they had a fight over it, an' the fella got killed. I don't just recall his name, but Peterson buried him out behind the stable. I know that 'cause I come on him when he was diggin' the grave, an' I seen the body. I run up to the house before he could see me, an' Julia—Mrs. Peterson was cryin' fit to kill. I useta go with Julia before she married him. She married for money but it never done her no good—just brought trouble—"

"You ran to the house, and then what?" prompted Attorney Crowe impatiently.

"An' then he come in an' caught me there, an' says he's gonna kill us too. But then he started drinkin' again an' pretty soon he passed out. An' then Julia, she sent for this specialist, an' she kept Peterson supplied with liquor so he was too fuddled to do anything until the specialist got there. After that they took him away—an' kept him till—"

"You took the five hundred dollars out of the store and gave it to Julia Peterson?" demanded Attorney Crowe.

"Yeah—I did. We was afraid he'd get loose an' come back here an'—an' kill us both. He wrote letters, promis-in' to come back an' get us if it took fifty years. I gave Julia the money, an' that same night he came back. He stayed for a couple days, an' we thought he was gonna be all right, but then he started drinkin' again after all those years. An' he kinda went crazy. He killed Julia—with the shotgun . . ."

"And you killed him," said Attorney Crowe.

Bert Smith nodded limply. "He was after me," he muttered. "I come to the house to ask Julia for my money back. He was downstairs, an' he was drunk. He told me what he done, an' I knew it was the truth. He had blood all over him. The shotgun was layin' on the kitchen table, where he'd just cleaned it and reloaded it. He started for the gun, but I got it first an' run

out the back door, with him after me. He caught up with me, an' I—I turned around an' the gun went off . . ."

THREE hours later Steffi and I were on the highway to Chicago. It was a gray dawn, but the rain had stopped. My car had been recovered intact, in a small shed in the woods. There was still a strong odor of kerosene where Bert Smith's saturated trousers had touched the upholstery.

"What will they do to him, that old Smith brother?" inquired Steffi, still bright-eyed after a night of horror.

"Probably let him off with a few years," I said, yawning sleepily.

"Ah, you are tired. No?" she said solicitously. "After your business in Chicago is finished, we shall have a nice rest."

"Let's plan on that," I said fervently.

"But yes. It is already planned," she assured me sweetly. "Aunt Sophie will be delighted to see us."

THE END

LOCK UP THE ARMY!

FROM Sao Paulo, Brazil, comes the strange story of the army that never goes to war. More astonishing is the reason why, for all its men are in the guardhouse.

The army behind bars is the brain-child of Dr. Nelson de Silva Gomes, sub-director of Sao Paulo's House of Detention. Dr. Gomes, who designed this unique experiment in prison reform, contends that a criminal can receive no better preparation for his acceptance back into civilian life than to learn self-discipline. Accordingly, the prison life is modeled after that of the regular Brazilian Army. Dr. Silva himself is commander in chief, and his officers, to whom he delegates authority, are themselves prisoners. The officer's insignia are the same as those worn in the regular Brazilian Army, and the uniform of the troops is complete even to a pair of spats. The only feature which distinguishes this unit behind bars from others on the free side of the fence, is their firearms. Dr. Silva's army drills with sticks instead of rifles; all officers carry small Brazilian flags instead of sabers.

Most of the prisoners participating in the experiment are minor offenders. Although they are

not required to join the Army, all of them are enthusiastic participants. The only thing that reminds them of their prison background is that their maneuvers must be conducted behind prison walls. Of course, no one is allowed outside the gates until his period of confinement has expired. Evidence of the prisoners' satisfaction with their "Army" life is the fact that since the unit was founded in 1941, no prisoner has ever tried to escape.

Like the regular Army, Dr. Silva's army has its own guardhouse patrolled by a force of MP's. These policemen are required to submit in writing all accusations against their fellow criminals for serious infractions of the rules. Only one trial has been necessary so far. Here again, the self-discipline method was employed. A board of officers presided at the court and passed judgment against the offender. The sentence was sixty days suspension from all army activities. This was sufficient punishment for the criminals' criminal.

As the final touch to this amazing experiment in penology, the prisoners who graduate and enter civilian life once more, are given an honorable discharge!—Pete Bogg.



ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN!



By

GARY LEE HORTON

CRIME BY AIR?

THE chief of the United States Secret Service, Frank J. Wilson, predicted recently that crime problems after World War II would be greater than law enforcement agencies had ever before encountered. The widespread use of the helicopter that the airplane industry forecast for the future will probably be adopted quickly by criminals to further their own illegal activities, he warned.

The problems of the detective, the policeman, and the police laboratory will be multiplied many,

many times. There will be more cases involving the return of lawbreakers from foreign countries when private use of air transportation will become more common.

In attempting to cope with this situation, police agencies will have to cooperate to a higher degree than ever before. Perhaps the city will have to take some of its police out of squad cars and train them to flit quickly about from place to place behind the wheel of a helicopter! One of the newer perils of civilization!

CRIME'S NEST

TEN THOUSAND pool rooms! That's how many were in New York City alone in the 1930's. The number becomes more astounding when compared to only 400 dance halls, 1,300 bowling alleys and 2,000 theatres in the city.

What has this overwhelming number of pool rooms to do with crime? Perhaps there is no

connection, yet one famous New York detective has pointed out a striking relation between them.

Having studied young criminals for over twenty years, he found that the low-grade pool room is the chief hangout of the crook, and more burglaries among 16 to 21 year old boys are planned there than in any other single place.

CRIME BEGINS AT HOME

A POPULAR notion is that foreigners are largely responsible for crimes committed in the U. S. Survey figures have shown a fact which sharply denies this idea. 203 out of every 100,000 foreign-born white people were arrested. 325 out of every 100,000 native-born white people were arrested, or more than 50% more!

In nine of our largest cities it was found that there were four times more robbery and three times more burglary among native-born persons than foreigners. Crimes of violence showed a more equal distribution but even here, native-born people committed the greater number of the major crimes.

INVITATION TO CRIME

WHEN burglars entered a Chicago tavern six times in six months, shattering windows each time to make their illegal entry and make off with their loot, the tavernkeeper's sister took the matter into her own hands. She might not be able to prevent another theft but she

hoped at least to avoid another difficult job of cleaning up broken glass.

Addressing her unwelcome visitors, she put out the following welcome sign:

"Please don't break any more windows. The door is open! Help yourself."

HOW OLD IS CRIME?

THOUGH a boy under twenty-one is still a minor in the eyes of civil law, he assumes full maturity at sixteen in some states and eighteen in others where criminal law is concerned. In New York state, during a five year period, youths were twenty-three per cent of those arrested for serious crimes. But they were twenty-nine per cent of those convicted.

Statistics have shown that older age groups benefit to a greater extent than youth from acquittals and other forms of dispositions other than conviction. Three reasons may be cited for this apparent discrimination against the youthful criminal. The fact that he may not be so well represented by counsel, and commits the crime with a less practiced hand must not escape consideration.

Yet there is still another factor which enters in. Some judges may believe that youth must be taught its lesson, and go on to act accordingly.

The cold fact remains that youth is law's step-child. From the point of view of biology, manhood begins where adolescence ends. But no such immediate transition is provided for in our social order. There seems to be a double standard for measurement. The civil law states that a man must wait until he is twenty-one years old before he may vote or be held to a contract, or in other words, assume full legal rights. Under criminal law, a boy is taken out of the jurisdiction of the juvenile courts in some states at the age of sixteen, although in most other states at seventeen or eighteen.

You Know Too Much!

By **RICHARD BRISTER**

SOMETIMES, he thought bitterly, he almost wished Pop would get out the crosscut and saw down that old oak tree. Maybe you couldn't hate a tree, rightly, but when you've practically walked your fourteen-year-old legs off since dawn, like Jeff had, trying to get out of sight of the house you lived in, that doggoned old oak, sticking up like a ranger's tower above the scrub pine, could get you mad as a

hornet. It was a regular eye-sore.

Jeff had climbed to the very tip-top of a pine, like he'd read about the old Indian scouts doing. He let his eyes swing around the horizon, and there was that darn old oak, about seven miles off. It was sort of hazed-over, in the distance, but to Jeff's bitter eyes it looked big as old Rufe, Pop's prize



**Jeff possessed the normal amount
of curiosity common to any boy.**

**It was enough, he learned, to
bring him close to death**



"You'll dig," the man said coldly, "or you'll die . . . right now!"

rooster, flapping his wings on the barnyard fence, and making an early morning pest of himself with his crowing.

Jeff took the shiny new compass he'd got for his birthday out of his pocket, and watched the needle dart back and forth beneath its glass window. He made a disgruntled face at the oak tree. "Looks like you just won't let me get lost. And without being lost, what good's a compass?"

Climbing down, he stopped for a while to watch a pair of buzzards floating in lazy wide circles above a small hollow about a quarter mile from him. It was one small island of green in miles of brown-burnt scrub pine, and as the buzzards circled above it, Jeff suddenly tensed with excitement.

He'd seen something move in that patch of green. Squinting harder, he could make out the figures of two men, like toy soldiers at such a distance.

"Now, what're they up to?" he wondered, and at the same time scolded himself for not noticing those circling buzzards right off. One of those old timers would have, say, like Kit Carson.

Jeff thought it was kind of suspicious, those men being out here. Pop said he'd warp his head, reading a lot of trashy bang-bang western stories, and Mom said his imagination was a mite too lively. But what *proper* sort of business would bring two men 'way out here, forty miles from the nearest town, this time of year?

"It's not hunting season," he thought, squinting hard at the distant figures. "Those things they've got in their hands *could* be guns, maybe, but if I had a shotgun, I'd handle it—hey, those aren't guns. They're spades. Or shovels!"

Sure. With his imagination to fill in the gaps, he could see that now. The men were digging. But why digging way out here in this God-forsaken scrub

country? Gee, he thought excitedly, they might be some sort of criminals. Maybe they buried some stolen money there, years ago, and just came back to get it. Or maybe they've just pulled off some job, and are getting rid of their swag till the cops quite trying to catch them.

"I know," he thought tensely. "I'll stalk 'em."

The thought sent a prickly quiver of anticipation along his backbone. He climbed the rest of the way down the pine tree quickly, careful to keep the fat trunk between himself and the clearing. His mind skimmed eagerly back over everything he'd ever read about stalking. Come up on your quarry into the wind. That was the most important. But shucks, not stalking humans! Main thing was to wiggle up on them quiet, and just not let 'em see you. Or see any bushes or grass move, while you're sneaking up on them.

THE wind was coming right toward him from the clearing, so there was no need of circling. Within ten minutes, he had crept right up to the edge of the small hollow, with its green grass carpet, and was squinting down on the two mysterious strangers. He was so close that he could fling a stone in the hole they'd dug as easy as pitching horseshoes.

A big rust-colored mongrel dog sat patiently near them, and Jeff chuckled, glad that he had come up into the wind. He saw that the men had cut out great square sections of sod with their flat-edge shovels, and had stacked them in a neat pile.

Down at the opposite end of the hollow was a battered old coupe. Jeff was startled. He hadn't realized there was any kind of a road to this clearing. But he could see the open space in the bushes where the car had come in, and

some rutted old wheel tracks.

He sighed gently. "Guess Mom was right, though. My imagination *is* a mite too lively. They're just digging sod for a lawn or a terrace—uh, oh, looks like I've put my foot in it."

He hadn't felt the wind changing. It had though. It had swung around directly behind him, and it didn't take long for that ugly-looking mongrel down there to catch Jeff's scent and start investigating. The dog was growling down low in his throat, sniffing, bristling. He ran up toward where Jeff lay hidden.

Jeff stood up quickly. "Call your dog off, fellows," he said conversationally, and having seen a few dogs in his time, he walked down, straight toward the excited mongrel. "Don't seem like he likes me."

The men jerked around like a pair of flushed quail. One of them, tall, pale, gangling, with a round little pot belly that looked grotesquely out of place on him, spat out viciously, "Where the hell'd *you* come from, bud?" He looked scared about something. "Here, Duke. Stand, damn you!"

The dog whined uneasily and wagged its tail in swift arcs, sort of apologizing. Jeff went down on his haunches and scratched the dog's ears and had a friend in less than ten seconds.

"Ain't no need to get all sweated up, mister." He walked over to look at the big hole they had dug. "I just happened to see you fellas takin' up sod, and—"

He cut it off sharp, staring wide-eyed at the hole they had dug, and gulping. He could see down to the bottom, and he saw right off the hole was too deep for just sod cutting. It was long and narrow, about seven by three. It was partly filled in with fresh brown earth. But not filled in enough to cover the chest of the human corpse that lay face up on the bottom!

Jeff went numb and feathery inside as the shock of it hit him. It was his first sight of death and he was totally unprepared for it.

The tall thin man with the pot belly let his shovel fall, and walked over toward him. "Whatsa matter, kid? Turn your stomach, does it?"

Jeff swallowed and tried to talk. But no words came. The man glanced at his companion, a stocky red-haired fellow with skin the stained yellow of new potatoes.

"Told you we should've give Hank a proper plantin'," he grumbled. "No matter how much it cost us. Now we've gone and spoiled this kid's breakfast for him."

The stocky man grunted. "Nuts, Tiny. Ixnay on the agsgay."

Jeff said, gulping, "You mean—you didn't have enough money to pay for a reg'lar funeral? That's why—"

The tall man, the one the red-head had called Tiny, said quickly, "That's right, kid. It's like this. What's your name anyhow?"

"Jeff."

"Jeff what?"

"Jeff Wilkins."

"Mine's Tiny, Jeff. And this here's Red. What I was sayin', this here sti—this dead guy—he-uh-well, y' see, he was my brother. He just passed away Monday, and bein' I'm all the family left, and hard up for money—" The tall man plucked a blade of grass, and bit the end of it. He was sweating, as he continued. "Well, Joe never had much religion. He said all he wanted was to be stuck in a hole somewhere in the mountains." He sent a flicking glance toward his stocky companion. "Right, Red?"

Jeff didn't like the way the short man kept staring at him.

"Trouble with you, Tiny, is you're thick about people."

The tall man glared. "Dammit, Red. I—"

"You didn't really think you could sell it? That cock-and-bull story! I was watching the boy scout, while you were talkin'. It was all he could do to keep from busting out laughing."

Jeff said numbly, "I wasn't laugh—"

"You were too busy keeping your knees from rattling," the short man said gruffly. "Dammit, Tiny, I told you we should've dumped that in the river." He waved at the hole. "The kid's wise. You know what that means."

"If you'd kept your face buttoned up, he'd've thought—"

"He'd've gone home and told his people all about it. Get smart."

JEFF just stood there, gulping, while the words swirled about him. He was too scared to really hear what was said, almost too scared to think. All he did know was that he'd got himself mixed up in something real bad. Suddenly the little thatched farmhouse he'd left this morning, and even that big old oak tree, seemed like a vision of heaven.

On a sudden wild impulse, he wheeled around, bolting, made a quick jump over the unfinished grave, and sprinted hard for the edge of the clearing.

The short man's gravelly voice cracked like a whiplash behind him.

"Up, Duke! Get him!"

The dog snarled and came after Jeff in an eager rush. Jeff searched the ground for a stick or a club, but couldn't see any. His panic-struck glance fell on a nice-sized stone. He went crouching for it, and then two things happened at once.

The dog, Duke, who had apparently forgotten Jeff's scratching his head, hit Jeff hard in the legs, and half tripped him. At the same time, a gun roared,

the sound of it echoing weirdly within the close confines of the little clearing.

Jeff went sprawling hard on his face and rolled over, whimpering with panic, kicking at Duke, trying to keep the big devil's drooling fangs away from him.

The redheaded man ran over swiftly. He had an ugly snub-nosed automatic in his hand. Jeff could see smoke curling lazily out of its muzzle.

"Down, Duke. *Down!*" His eyes brushed Jeff like a cake of ice. "That wasn't clever, kid."

Jeff got up. "Look, mister, I—"

"I looked all I'm goin' to." With a lightning motion he reversed his grip on the gun and leaned forward. His arm flashed out in a clubbing arc and the heavy butt of the gun cracked Jeff's leg smartly, alongside of the knee.

"Hey—*ouch!*" Jeff groaned and dropped to the ground. It felt as if a hot poker had stabbed at his kneecap. "Holy gee, mister, you didn't have no call to—"

"Shut up, kid. And get up."

Jeff flexed the sore leg. Already a big round bruise was growing. He winced and gasped, "Can't. Feels just like it's broke."

Red came forward one step and kicked him. The toe of his heavy shoes gouged unmercifully into Jeff's ribs. He scrambled erect, despite the wrenching pain in his kneecap.

"That's better." Red stared morosely at him. "Don't s'pose you'll try runnin' again in a hurry. Now grab one of them shovels and start fillin' that hole in. You, Tiny, give him a hand. And work fast. That shot I had to fan at him will prob'ly rouse up every nosy rube in the section."

Why, sure, Jeff's spinning brain told him. Pop would surely have heard it, and wondered at it. He'd not pass it off, either, when Jeff failed to show up for lunch. Pop worried easy, and he'd

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come looking for him.

JEFF let the shovel drag a little, and made a gymnastic contortion of his facial muscles, as if the knee were paining him almost beyond endurance. If he could stall around, he thought, if he could keep them right here till Pop came along, with good old Spot to lead him unerringly along the trail Jeff had taken, there might be a chance.

Spot was a hunter, with one of the keenest noses in this part of the country, and Pop wouldn't likely fail to tote his old 12 gauge along with him, after hearing that shot. So Jeff's move was to stall, and keep stalling, until—

"You, kid—" it was Red's gravelly voice barking "*—move*, with that shovel. Tiny's doin' twice as much as you, and he ain't no spring chicken."

Jeff made a pained face and stepped up his pace for a moment. But then he slowed down again, by degrees, and hoped Red wouldn't notice.

But apparently nothing escaped the sharp eyes of the stocky redhead. Jeff realized he was not fooling Red when he saw the man's shadow sweep the fresh earth beneath him. He saw the silhouette of an arm raised to strike him, and whirled with instinctive fright.

The gun came down squarely atop his head. He had less than a second to prepare himself for it, but he knew enough to bend at the knees. That softened the impact a good deal, and his battered straw farmer hat sopped up some more of the clubbing force of the blow. He flopped limply to the ground and lay quite still. His brain was whirling like mad and his whole body screamed with taut nerves. But he didn't quite blank out.

He told himself weirdly that he must not allow that to happen. Let them think he had, but—

And then a wave of nausea swept

over him. Total darkness descended upon him.

HHE AWOKE choking and coughing, and feeling bruised all over. It was pitch dark where he was. He was in that old coupe, in the trunk compartment, he realized.

He could hear the throbbing grind of the driving rod underneath him. The boards on which he was lying kept groaning with every bump in the road, and dust arose from them, stinging his eyes, clogging his nostrils.

What was even worse, he was tied, hand and foot, his arms fastened securely behind him.

He wrenched at the bonds that were gouging his wrists, and cried out in pain as the thongs dug into his raw flesh.

A low surly growl came from close beside him. It was that rust-colored mongrel. Tiny and Red were taking no chances. They'd locked Duke in here to stand guard beside him.

He felt a slow dread steal through him, an impulse of panicky fright such as he'd never known in all his fifteen years. These men meant to kill him. He had to do something, get away from them somehow.

Maybe, he thought hopefully, the trunk wasn't locked. If he could pry the door open somehow, roll out, without being seen, he might still thwart these killers.

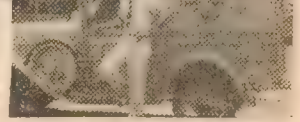
He wiggled back across the rough platform of boards on which he lay, and pried upward against the door with hunched neck and shoulders.

It didn't budge an inch, but stubbornly resisted the pressure. It was locked, all right. And to make matters worse, the dog, Duke, noticed his movements, there in the darkness, and snarled viciously at him.

Jeff heard the voice of Tiny, the tall man with the pot belly, saying some-

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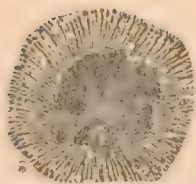
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"What?" Tiny scoffed. "And tie him right in with the Bedelhoff killing. Unh, unh. The place for him's that crick I pointed out to you on the way up here. Put a good sinker on him and he'll stay down for weeks. We'll be in California by the time they find him."

Jeff caught his breath in a sharp gasp of terror. Drown him! They were planning to drown him! Oh—my—good—Lord! he thought, almost crying. I didn't do anything. Just because a fella happens to wander into a couple of killers, he shouldn't ought to have to pay like this for it!

He wanted desperately to pray, but somehow, he just couldn't. He had an idea prayer was not the right thing for this moment—at least, not yet.

He remembered some of the narrow shaves he'd been reading about lately—the hair-breadth escapes of fellows like Dan Boone and Kit Carson. Those fellows weren't so long on prayer. They were more for action, when they got in a tight.

But what *could* he do? Gosh, when you're tied hand and foot, when you're half choking to death, locked up with a dog in the rear compartment of an old automobile, you can maybe *think* about action, but that's about all.

He suddenly swore, manlike, at the authors who'd written all those adventure books he'd been reading. A lot they knew about what it really was like to get caught by a pair of murderers!

He strained against his bonds again, but the effort proved futile. He settled quietly, puffing, eyes popping with panic, listening hopelessly to the droning voices of the pair up ahead in the front cushions.

GRADUALLY, the droning voices pieced out their story. Tiny and Red were apparently confirmed criminals. They'd heard about the dead man, Bedelhoff, keeping a large sum of money in his home, in a wall safe. They'd gone in after it, two nights ago, and Bedelhoff had surprised them in the act of breaking into the safe. In a fit of panic, Tiny had clubbed him to death. Then, to cover their trail from the police, they'd decided to cart the body away, so it would look like a simple disappearance, instead of murder.

But Jeff had spoiled that plan for them. So now they were agreed that he must disappear, too, disappear into the swirling waters beneath that bridge that Tiny had mentioned.

"There!" Tiny was saying triumphantly, all of a sudden. "There's the bridge, Red. See her, down there? You can just make out the silhouette in the moonlight."

And Red's gravelly voice, grunting: "We gotta move fast, about this. We been passin' too many farmhouses, t' suit my taste. Three, in the last ten minutes. No tellin' when some sod-buster'll bust down this road, on the way to town for a movie."

The car jounced along. Tiny's voice suddenly cut into the silence. "Hold it. There's a big stone over there, in the gutter, that's just right for our purpose."

The car stopped. Jeff's stricken ears heard footfalls outside, the straining breaths of human exertion, then a dull thud as the stone was deposited on the coupe's floorboards, up front.



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"I'll be tyin' the rope around it," Tiny said, panting, as the coupe rolled on. "When we get to the bridge, you haul the kid out, Red. I'll have a loop ready to slip over his neck, see? We'll have him over that rail in less than two seconds."

Red's throaty voice chimed in grimly. "It ain't the cleanest job I ever took part in. But it's efficient. You're beginnin' t' use the brains you were born with, Tiny."

Jeff's heart was thumping like a trip-hammer. He heard the tires rolling across the level board planks of the bridge. The car stopped. A key jabbed at the lock of the trunk compartment.

Jeff had a little trick from gym class, at school, which he thought briefly of using. He had learned it on the flying rings, a trick of dislocating his shoulders while hanging upside down. He had practiced the knack on a set of homemade rings up in the hayloft of the barn, and he had developed a contortionist's flexibility from the constant practice.

He could probably loop his hands, even tied as they were, up over his head, if he made a real effort to do so. He'd be less helpless, that way, with his tied hands in front of him. He could pick up some heavy object, and—

But there was no bludgeon of any kind on the floorboards he lay on. Besides, his feet were tied. He could do nothing that way, against Tiny's gun.

He lay still, and at the last moment, as the door opened, letting in a stream of pale moonlight, he lay still as a log, playing possum.

Tiny's voice said crisply, "He's still out cold. You think I oughta tap him one more, just for good measure?"

Red growled. "Forget it. Hey! What's that up the road there? Ain't that headlights?"

"Let's drive on," Tiny snapped. "We

can take care of the kid later."

Red said grimly, "They're a good two mile back. Come on. Quick. We'll dump him. We don't want to cart that kind of G-heat bait around any longer."

He was dragging Jeff out as he spoke. Jeff remembered that threatening mention of tapping him one more for good measure, and still played dead. Even while the rope slid over his head he played possum, even while the cord tightened against his throat.

Every fibre within ached to cry out for mercy. But instinct told him the hopelessness of it. Speech would earn him only the death-dealing blow that the tall man had suggested, that had been overruled by the redhead.

He allowed himself to be lifted bodily by the stocky man, while Tiny hoisted that stone to the rail. "Okay," Red grunted. "Down with him!"

JEFF was falling. This is it, he thought grimly. This is what it feels like to be murdered. Then he hit the cold water. The stone sank much faster than he did, and the rope tightened around his neck.

Jeff was a human fish in the water. He let the stone drag him down, down, and at about eight feet, the tugging stopped, the pressure relaxed against his chafed throat.

He did his little dislocation trick, throwing his bound hands up over his head with a quick twist of his loose shoulder muscles. It was tough going, getting his hands past his head, but he finally made it.

He had taken the precaution of drawing one deep breath, just before striking the water.

He let a little air out, and his lungs felt better. He jabbed his bound hands frantically into his pocket, where he kept the jackknife which is part of

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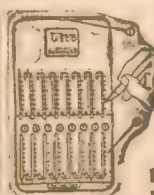
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every true farm boy's working equipment.

He had a tough time fishing it out. What was worse, his lungs were near bursting, although he supposed he'd only been under about thirty seconds.

Try as he might, he couldn't force both his hands into the pocket that held his knife. And he couldn't tear that stout corduroy, either. He was feeling a sick terror of failure rise in him when he had a thought. He upended himself in the water, head down. He felt the knife sliding down along his thigh, within the pocket. And as gravity pulled it through the opening, his frantic fingers closed greedily around it.

He was too desperate for breath now to waste any time trying to open it by ordinary methods. With his bound hands he held it to his mouth, grasped the big blade with his incisors, and pulled it out quickly.

Then he was sawing away like a contest-winning woodsman on the rope that bound his neck to that stone. The blade cut through it readily and he zoomed up, seal-like, to the creek's gurgling surface.

That first agonized gasp of air was like a dozen vanilla sodas. He thrashed his legs, paddled with both hands together, toward the shore of the creek, some twenty yards distant. He was on the verge of exhaustion, but he'd be double-doggoned, he told himself grimly, if he'd let any old creek have him now, after the time he'd been through!

Up the dirt road on the other side, he could see the receding taillight of that rusty old coupe containing Red and Tiny. And the beam of another car was coming down from the other side, the side toward which he was heading.

He paddled harder. He meant to reach shore, cut himself free, and be up there to flag down that second car, and do some business-like talking!

That second car, as luck would have it, belonged to a man named Purvis, a friend of Jeff's father. The man gaped ludicrously, as he heard Jeff's story, then snapped grimly.

"Hop in, son. We'll stop off at Bill Spade's place an' phone the police. They'll pick up that coupe easy enough, when it hits the state highway. An' Lord love that pair, if they try to put up a scrap against them state troopers!"

They didn't, Jeff was told later. The pair were too startled, and they gave up without a fight when the two carloads of troopers converged upon them.

There was, it evolved, a reward for the pair, and for his day's work—or nightmare, depending on how you looked at it—Jeff was presented with two thousand dollars.

Mom and Pop were impressed—Pop especially. "What I don't get, son, is how you could think so quick. I mean—there you was, near drownin', eight foot under water, and—"

"We-e-ll," Jeff grinned. "Tell you the truth, Pop, I'd been readin' about a case just like that in one of those books you keep cussin' at me for readin'. So I didn't have to do a whole heap of thinkin'."

"Never again," said his father solemnly, "will I criticize you for readin'. Why it saved your life, boy, not to mention the money you come by!" His eyes shone with interest. "Got that book handy? I'd like t' look at it."

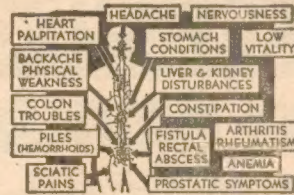
"Library book," Jeff said quickly. "Don't even remember the name, I've read so many."

He supposed that would have to be labelled as a prevarication. There was no such book, really. But it was a white lie, he figured. It would keep peace in the household.

And besides, what was the good of having "a mite too much imagination,"

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LAST RITES

THE dead on the battlefields had to be identified as well as civilian death accidents and this is the system our Army used in doing so. Units were organized during the French campaign which collected the dead and delivered them to the Division Collecting Point. Each body was then processed by graves registration personnel who identified the bodies, removed the personal effects, inventoried them, and filled out necessary data for the burial report.

The dog tags, worn by every American Service man, regardless of rank were then taken care of. One was put on the grave's cross and the other remained on the victim's body. Dog tags contain vital information such as full name, serial number, blood type, and religious preference. No rank is shown on the identification tag.

Finger-prints are sometimes difficult to make due to the condition of the body. Bodies are too old, decomposition sets in and sometimes the entire body is not available.

Tooth charts, personal recognition, laundry and other clothing marks, personal papers, personal effects, serial numbers—each and all of these proved to be a vital factor in identifying a dead body. Physical characteristics, such as height, weight, age, complexion, color of hair and eyes, tattoos, scars, deformities, moles and the like were also vitally important.

In cases where finger-prints were necessary the following procedure was used: finger prints had to be taken and recorded on the Report of Burial in every doubtful case, since the prints of all United States personnel are on file in Washington, and this was and still is the best means of establishing the identity of the deceased who might otherwise remain unknown. Fingertips of the deceased were then thoroughly washed to insure that no foreign matter prevented taking a clear impression. The fingertips were then inked carefully and sparingly to insure a clear outline of the ridges. In cases where the fingers were badly shrivelled up, an injection of water under the skin of the fingertip with a hypodermic needle was administered, thus swelling the fingertips.

Our Army has done wonders in this type of work. Ours is the most complete, infallible system used extensively throughout the world today. Our deepest appreciation goes to those who were so responsible and highly efficient and who have proved themselves where everything proves itself—on the field of battle.

—Jeffery Stevens.

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